THE NICK CARTER/KILLMASTER SER

A101	RUN, SPY, RUN
A114	SAFARI FOR SPIES
A116	FRAULEIN SPY
A122	SAIGON
A130	A BULLET FOR FID
A139	THE 13TH SPY
A228	MISSION TO VENICE
A229	DOUBLE IDENTITY
A238	THE DEVIL'S COCKPIT
A239	THE CHINESE PAYMASTE
A247	SEVEN AGAINST GREECE
A248	A KOREAN TIGER
A260	ASSIGNMENT: ISRAEL
A261	THE RED GUARD
A276	THE FILTHY FIVE
A277	THE BRIGHT BLUE DEAT
A288	WEB OF SPIES
A289	SPY CASTLE
A294	MACAO
A295	OPERATION MOON ROCK
A310	THE TERRIBLE ONES
A311	DRAGON FLAME
A312	HANOI
A313	OPERATION STARVATION
A314	THE MIND POISONERS
A315	THE EYES OF THE TIGE
A325	THE JUDAS SPY
A366	AMSTERDAM
A367	TEMPLE OF FEAR
A380	THE CHINA DOLL
A382	CHECKMATE IN RIO
A383	DANGER KEY
A384	ISTANBUL
A385	THE WEAPON OF NIGHT
A386	THE GOLDEN SERPENT

NICK CARTER

KILLMASTER SPY CHILLER

MSTERDAM

AWARD BOOKS
NEW YORK

TANDEM BOOKS
LONDON


AMSTERDAM

Chapter 1

Nick enjoyed trailing Amlie de Boer. The view was :imulating She was a man-stopper—truly one of the eautiful People. Eyes turned to follow the tall glow of er blondeness all through John F. Kennedy International irport. They clung to her as she strode to the KLM C-8 fan jet, admiring her bounce, the sleek white linen iit, the rich polished leather of her artist's case.

Moving behind her Nick heard the ramp man murmur ; his gaze followed the mini-skirt, "Who that?"

"Swedish star," the checker hazarded. He read Nick's :ket. "Mr. Norman Kent First class Thank you, sir."

Amlie was precisely where Nick knew she would be. e had obtained the numbered seat beside her He dallied th the pretty stewardess, giving Amlie a chance to settle d other seats to fill so that his appearance might seem gical. When he reached the seat he gave Amlie the yish Carter smile. It was normal for a big, tanned, althy-looking young man to be delighted with his luck. : said softly, "Good afternoon."

Soft pink lips formed a reply. Her long slim fingers igled with each other and untwined. Ever since he had ;ked up her trail outside Manson's she had appeared ise, uneasy, but not wary. *Nerves*, Nick thought.

He tucked his Mark Cross case under the seat and sat wn, lightly and neatly for such a big man, not jostling

the girl. She gave him the three-quarter angle of the gorgeous, polished bamboo sheen of her hair as she pretended interest out the window. He had an antenna for such moods—she wasn't hostile, just wrapped in worry.

The seats filled. Hatches slammed with less-than-solid aluminum thuds. The P.A. system chattered in three languages. Nick fastened his seat belt deftly, not interfering with the girl. She fumbled with hers. The fan jets whined and threatened. The big ship shuddered as it waddled to the line and growled viciously as the crew ran through the check lists.

Amlie's knuckles on the seat arms were white. She turned her head slightly and the bright blue orbs of a scared animal appeared close to Nick's own wide-open, steel gray eyes. He saw creamy skin, parted red lips, suspicion, fear.

He grinned, knowing how harmlessly pleasant he could appear. "Believe me I won't bother you," he said. "I could wait till drinks are served and use some conventional pitch. But I can tell by your hands that you're uneasy." The pretty fingers unclasped their grip, came together uiltily, then locked palm-to-palm in a tense position. "Is your first flight?"

"No—no. I'm all right. But—thank you." She added a tiny, sweet smile.

Still in low, tranquilizing, confessor tones Nick went on, "I wish I knew you well enough to hold your hands . . ." The blue eyes widened—a warning flash. " . . . for your peace of mind and my own pleasure. My Mother told me never to do that until introduced. Mother was a stickler for the correct thing. We were usually correct in Boston—"

The blue flash subsided. She listened. There was a twinkle of interest. Nick sighed, shook his head sadly. "Then Dad fell overboard during a race at the Cohasset Yacht Club. Near the finish. Right in front of the club."

The perfect brows arched over the scared eyes—which

were looking less scared. "But—I'm sure that happens. I've seen boat races—was he hurt?"

"Oh no. But Dad was such a determined man. He was still holding the bottle when he came up. And he tried to toss it back on board."

She gave an explosive gurgle. Her hands relaxed with the laugh.

Nick chuckled quietly with her. "And he missed."

She drew a deep breath and let it out. Nick smelled sweet milk and gin blended with the intriguing perfume. He shrugged. "So that's why I can't hold your hand till we're introduced. My name is Norman Kent."

Her smile belonged in a color spread in The New York *Times* Sunday Magazine. "I'm Amlie de Boer. It won't be necessary to hold my hand I feel better. Thank you anyway, Mr. Kent. Are you a psychologist?"

"Just a businessman." The fan jets went to work with screams. Nick imagined the four throttles easing forward, recalled the intricacies of take-off, remembered the statistics—and felt like gripping the seat arms himself. Amlie's knuckles were white again.

He said, "They tell about two men in an airliner like this. One is completely relaxed, dozing. He's a regular traveler. Nothing disturbs him. The other is in a cold sweat, gripping the seat, trying to swallow and can't. Can you guess what he is?"

The ship vibrated. The world raced past Amlie's window. Nick's stomach flattened against his spine. She looked at him "I don't know."

"*That* man is a pilot."

She thought a moment, burst out laughing, and for a moment of delicious intimacy the blonde head swayed onto his shoulder The plane lurched, picked its toes off the earth after a stumble and climbed at the near-stall angle as the eagle-eye poured on coal and cursed the anti-noise orders

They leveled off. The lighted signs changed. P.A. ora-

tors babbled. They unfastened their seat belts and Amlie said, "Mr. Kent—did you know that a commercial airliner is a machine that theoretically cannot fly?"

"No!" Nick lied. He admired the way she snapped back, wondered how much she knew about the mess she was in. "Let's have a drink to the pilot's health."

Nick found Amlie delightful company. She drank martinis made Mr. Kent's way and after three her nervousness vanished. They ate the marvelous Dutch dinner, chatted, read, dozed. After they snapped off the reading lights and settled down for naps, like overstuffed children of a lavish civilization, she rolled her head close to him and whispered, "I'd like to hold your hand—now."

It was a mutual warming, an interchange of humanity, a doubling of strength, two hours of pretense that the world is not what it is.

How much did she know, Nick wondered, and was what she knew the reason for her early case of nerves? She was with Manson's, the haughty jewel house, and she was used to flying between their New York and Amsterdam offices. AXE was reasonably certain that Manson's fre- couriers were part of an unusually efficient espionage pipeline. Some of them had been thoroughly searched. They were clean. What would Amlie's nerves do if she knew that Nick Carter, AXE's N3—alias Norman Kent, diamond buyer for Bard Galleries—had met her not by chance?

Her warm hand tingled in his. Was she dangerous? AXE agent Herb Whitlock spent a year pinpointing Manson's as the prime espionage pipeline suspect. He had been fished out of an Amsterdam canal. An accident, it was labeled. Herb had insisted that Manson's had developed such a foolproof, simple pipeline that the firm had virtually become an intelligence broker, the professional spy's middleman. Herb had bought photocopies—for $2,000, so plentiful were they—of the U.S. Navy's Mark 92 Fleet

Ballistic Missile Weapon System, complete with schematics of the new four-channel geoballistic computer.

Nick sniffed Amlie's delectable aroma. Charming. In answer to her murmured question he said, "I'm an amateur buying diamonds. It'll probably be a disaster."

"When a man talks like that he's building the best business defense there is. Do you know the four-C rule?"

"Color, clarity, cut and carat. What I need are connections—and advice about cuts, rare pieces, reliable wholesalers. We have some wealthy customers because we're very ethical. You can put our stuff under a ten-power glass and it'll be perfect and flawless if we said it."

"Well—I'm with Manson's. I know something about the business—"

She talked about merchandising jewelry. His prodigious memory retained everything she said. "Norman Kent's" grandfather was the first Nick Carter, the detective who introduced many techniques into what he called the science of law enforcement. A transmitter in a cocktail olive dummy would have pleased but not surprised him; *he* originated the telegraph set in a pocket watch. You plugged in by putting the nails in the heel of your shoe onto contacts in the floor.

Nicholas Huntington Carter III became N3 of AXE—the "unknown service" of the United States, so secret its existence haunts the CIA every time *their* name is spread out in the newspapers. He was one of four Killmasters with right-of-decision. AXE was committed to supporting his actions. He could be retired but not prosecuted. It was a lot of weight for a man to carry. Nick kept himself in the physical condition of a professional athlete.

He had given a lot of thought to Manson's espionage pipeline. It worked beautifully. A bait diagram of a PEAPOD six-warhead missile, "sold" to a known amateur spy at Huntsville, Alabama, had arrived in Moscow nine days later. An AXE agent had bought a copy—perfect in every fine phony detail, and all eight complete pages! This

in spite of the alerting of 16 U.S. agencies to watch, check and block. As a *security test it was* a full-dress flop. The three Manson couriers who moved during the nine days were given, "by chance," complete searches. Nothing was found.

Now Amlie, he thought drowsily, involved or innocent? And if involved, how is it done?

" . . . the diamond market is artificial," Amlie was saying. "If there is a giant discovery that can't be controlled, *kerslump* go all values."

Nick sighed. "It scares me. You not only can lose your shirt in the business it can collapse overnight. If your inventory of diamonds is big—zippo! What you paid a million for may be worth half that."

"Or a third. I think that's as low as the market would drop at once. Then it might sag and sag, the way silver once did."

"I've got to buy with care, I can see that."

"Do you have introductions?"

"Yes, to several places."

"Including Manson's?"

"No."

"I thought not. We're not really wholesale, although like all the big houses we move lots now and then. You ought to meet our director—Philipine Laansma. He knows as much about the market as anyone outside the cartels themselves."

"Is he in Amsterdam?"

"Yes. Today. He practically commutes to New York."

"Introduce me to him, Amlie. Perhaps we can do some business. I need a guide until I learn the city, too. How about giving me a little escorted tour this afternoon and then being my guest for dinner?"

"I'd love to. Do you also have sex on your mind?"

Nick blinked. The surprising thrust slowed him for a second and he wasn't used to it. His reflexes were sup-

posed to be honed "I didn't—until you mentioned it. But it's always interesting"

"If nicely handled. With common sense and experience."

"And talent Of course it's like a prime steak or a fine wine. You've got to have something to start with. Then don't ruin it. If you don't know ask . . or get the book."

"I think people are happier if they are perfectly frank. I mean—you can anticipate a nice day or a good meal but you're not supposed to anticipate nice sex. Isn't that true? Do you suppose it is our Puritan heritage or a Victorian holdover or what the hell?"

"Certainly we have gotten more—er, *frank* in the last few years Personally I love life. And because sex is part of life I love it too. Sort of figuratively The way you might say you love skiing or Danish cakes or Picasso's work." As he spoke he kept his bland eyes on hers, wondering if she was putting him on The blue sparklers were bright and guileless, the lovely features as innocent as those of a Christmas-card cherub

She nodded. "I thought so You're *mature* So many American businessmen are silent grabbers Go to dinner, gulp drinks, listen to their bragging and get grabbed. Ugh! And they wonder why American women knock sex. And when I say sex I don't mean jumping into bed all the time. I mean a relationship that's fun and you're strong friends and you can *talk* to each other And if you get the urge and want to plan any special way to do it tonight you talk about it. When the time comes. You can *communicate.*"

"Where will I call for you?"

"Oh." She took an engraved Manson's card out of her purse and wrote on the back of it. "About three o'clock. I won't go back to the shop after lunch. When we land I'm going to meet Phil Laansma. Is anyone meeting you?"

"No."

"Come with me. You can start your extra co[illegible]s with

him. He's sure to be helpful. A good man for you to know. Look—there's new Schiphol Air Terminal now. Isn't it gigantic?"

Nick looked dutifully out the window, agreed it was big and impressive.

He saw four big runways in the far distance, a control tower and buildings that looked ten stories high. Another of man's impressive pastures for his winged steeds.

"It's thirteen feet below sea level," Amlie said. "Thirty-two airlines use it. Wait till you see the information system and the *Tapisroulant* moving carpet. See the farmlands? They are building soundproof houses for the farmers and cows." She leaned over him in her enthusiasm as a guide. Her breasts were firm, her hair fragrant.. "The Stedelijk Museum of Amsterdam will have a gallery—Oh, I'm sorry, perhaps you know all this. Have you been to new Schiphol before?"

"No, only to old Schiphol. Years ago. I usually fly into London or Paris."

"Old Schiphol is two miles over there. It's the freight inal now."

"You're an excellent guide, Amlie. And I detect a love or The Netherlands—"

She chuckled. "Mr. Laansma says I'm still a stubborn Dutchman. My parents came from Hilversum, just east of Amsterdam."

"And you found the perfect job. One that lets you travel to your old homeland."

"Yes. It wasn't hard—knowing the languages."

"You're happy with it?"

"Yes." She tilted her head until the lovely lips were close to his ear. "You've been nice. I *was* uneasy, over-tired. I'm not now. When you fly a lot the time chan bother you. Sometimes you get two ten-hour working d strung together. I want you to meet Philipine. He guide you around pitfalls."

It was a sweet speech. Probably she believed it.

patted her arm. "I was lucky to select this seat. You're more than beautiful, Amlie. You're *humanly* intelligent. That means real heart for people. The reverse, say, of a scientist who chooses his career—with nuclear bombs."

"That's the nicest and most complex compliment I've ever received, Norman. I think we should get on now."

They passed through the formalities, recovered their baggage. Amlie led him to where a short youth had tucked a black Mercedes into a turnout near an unfinished building. "Our secret parking lot," Amlie said "Hi, Jacobus."

"Hi," the youth answered, and came forward and took their large bags.

It came then A vicious, heart-speeding, anus-tightening snarl of sound that Nick knew well. He hurried Amlie to the car and pushed her into the rear seat as she asked, "What was *that*?"

If you've never heard a rattlesnake's vibrato at your toe, the flutter-trill of an artillery shell or the nasty *whrrr* of a passing bullet—you're just alarmed the first time. When you know what the sound is you're alerted and you *move*. A slug had passed near their heads. Nick had heard no shot. The gun was well-silenced, probably a single shot. Had the sniper reloaded yet?

"That was a bullet," he told Amlie and Jacobus, knowing that they probably knew or had guessed it. "Drive out. Stop and wait for me when you can, but don't stay here."

He turned and ran toward the gray stone cliff of the unfinished building. He jumped a barrier, took steps three at a time.

Along the front of the long structure several groups of workmen were installing windows and hardware. They did not even glance toward him as he jumped through the maw-like door opening.

The room was gigantic, filled with the fine dust-haze of construction, smelling of lime and curing concrete. Two men far to his right held the plow-like hand [illegible] errazzo polishers, the big circular brushes making [illegible]

swirls. Not them, Nick decided. Their hands were white with wet dust.

He ran with great, light, bounding strides to a stairway which went up beside four ranks of unmoving escalators. Up, he thought. Assassins like height and empty buildings. Maybe he was reloading and didn't see my rush. If he did see me, he's running now. Look for a runner—

On the floor above something fell with a crash. As Nick burst into the open—actually two flights up because the lobby ceiling was high—a cascade of gray, cement-stained planks were tumbling through a crevice toward the floor below. Two men stood near him, waving their grimy hands and yelling in Italian. Far, far away the bulky shape of a man—a squat, almost simian figure—vanished downward and out of sight.

Nick trotted to a window in the front of the building. It overlooked the space where the Mercedes had been parked. He would have liked to search for a spent cartridge case but it wasn't worth getting involved with the construction people or the police. The Italian masons were starting to yell in his direction. He ran lightly down the stairs and caught the Mercedes in a turnout where Jacobus pretended to be waiting for a pickup.

He climbed in and told a pale Amlie, "I think I caught a glimpse of him. Heavy, low-hung type."

She had a knuckle at her lip. "A shot at us—me—you? Really? I can't think—"

She was near panic. "One can't be sure," he said. "Maybe it was a bolt that blew off an air compressor. Who would want to hurt us?"

She made no answer. After awhile the knuckle was lowered. Nick patted her hand. "You might tell Jacobus to forget this little incident. Do you know him well enough for that?"

"Yes." She chattered with the driver in Dutch. He shrugged and called their attention to a low flying helicop-

ter. It was a new, giant Soviet model, carrying a bus slung [illegible] fter a few words, "You can go to the hotels from the airport by boat. Or the bus fare is fifty cents."

"Real Dutch thrift. And they're supposed to be stubborn. I didn't realize they'd be so dangerous."

"Maybe it *was* a compressor bolt."

He didn't think she believed it. He observed the new-and-ancient city. They passed Yondelpark and headed toward Dam Squre in the old city. There is, he thought, an orderly durability about Amsterdam that is different from any other city I know.

"Shall we tell your boss about the airport incident?" he asked.

"Let's not." No excuses, just *let's not.* "I'm meeting Philipine at the Grand Hotel Krasnapolsky. It's a fascinating hotel. You must try the pancakes The founder originated the recipe in 1865 and they've been on the menu since. He had a small café. Now it's a giant complex but still charming."

She had brought herself under control Guts, he decided. She would need them. He was reasonably sure his cover had not been broken—certainly not so soon. She must be wondering if that bullet was for her.

Jacobus promised to deliver Nick's bags to his hotel, the Die Port van Cleve nearby on Voorburgwal, and he took along Amlie's overnight bag as well Nick noted that she kept the big flat artist's case with her, as she had on the plane, where she even carried it to the powder room. Its contents might prove interesting, or they might be just ad proofs and sketches of jewelry settings; it was not worth a move on his part—yet.

Amlie led him through the picturesque Krasnapolsky. Philipine Laansma rated. He was having breakfast with another man in a magnificently paneled private [illegible]ng room. Amlie put the leather case beside Laa

moment she was with him, and then introduced Nick. ". . . Mr. Kent is interested in diamonds."

The men stood up for formal handshakes, bows, invitations to breakfast. The man with Laansma was Constant Draijer, "of Manson's"—spoken like an honor.

Laansma was of moderate height, slim and wiry, with keen brown eyes that rarely stayed still. Although he seemed calm, there was a restlessness about him, a strong drive that could be either work energy or virility or both. He wore a gray sharkskin suit of Italian cut that just missed being avant garde, a black vest with small flat buttons that looked like gold, a red and black Guard's tie and one ring with a blue-white diamond of about three carats that was certainly flawless.

Draijer was a lesser edition, like a man bucking for the next step up and smart enough not to compete with the boss. His vest had plain gray buttons: his diamond was perhaps a carat. But his eyes had learned to move and watch. They were disconnected from his smile.

Nick said it was a pleasure. They sat down.

"Are you with one of the wholesalers, Mr. Kent?" Laansma asked. "Manson's does business with some of them."

"No. I'm with the Bard Galleries."

"Mr. Kent says he hardly knows anything about diamonds," Amlie said.

Laansma smiled, white teeth a neat line under the brown mustache. "That's what the smart buyer says. I imagine Mr. Kent carries a glass and knows how to use it. Are you stopping at this hotel?"

"No. At the Die Port van Cleve," Nick answered.

"A fine hotel," Laansma said. He waved at a hovering waiter and said simply, "Breakfasts." Then he turned to Amlie and Nick detected more warmth than a director would show an employee. Ah, Amlie, Nick decided, you've got your job insured with the oldest policy in the

world. It doesn't cover your life. "Good trip?" Laansma asked her.

"Thanks to Mr. Kent—I mean Norman. Can we be American and use first names?"

"Certainly." Laansma spoke definitely, without asking Draijer. "Rough air?"

"No. I felt a little under the weather. We shared a seat and Norman cheered me up."

Laansma's brown eyes congratulated Nick on good taste. There was no jealousy in them, just speculation. Nick decided Laansma would wind up "director" in any field he chose. He had the unfakable sincerity of a born politician. He believed his own fantasies Laansma said, "Please excuse me for a moment."

He returned in less than five minutes; gone long enough for a visit to the men's room, or to do other things.

Breakfast was assorted breads, rolls, a mound of golden butter, three kinds of cheese, slices of beef, boiled eggs with sauces, coffee—and beer. Laansma gave Nick a thumbnail summary of the Amsterdam diamond market, mentioned men he might talk to and described some points of interest. " . . and if you'll stop by my office tomorrow, Norman, I'll show you what we have "

Nick said he would, thanked them for the breakfast, shook hands around and left. When he had gone Philipine Laansma lit a short, fragrant cigar He patted the leather case Amlie had brought and looked at her. "You didn't open this on the plane?"

"Of course not." Her tone was not quite steady.

"Or leave him alone with it?"

"Phil—I know my job "

"Do you think it odd that he of all men on [illegible] should have the seat next to you?"

Her brilliant blue eyes opened wider. "[illegible] were probably other diamond men on [illegible] have gotten a competitor instead of a [illegible] you'll sell him something."

Laansma patted her hand. "Don't boil. Constant—check on him. Call New York banks if you have to."

The other man nodded. Laansma's very composed features hid a churning mind. He had thought that Amlie had turned into a dangerous, scared woman who knew too much. Now he wasn't sure. He had instantly decided that "Norman Kent" was a security agent—now he doubted his hasty decision. He wondered if he was right in having called Oom. It was too late to stop him now. At least, Oom and his team would learn the truth about Kent.

Amlie frowned. "You really think perhaps—"

"I think nothing, darling. But as you say we may sell him a nice order. It's just a credit check."

Nick walked along Damstraat, enjoying the spring air and getting his bearings. He glanced down picturesque Kalverstraat, where colorful groups clustered in the traffic-free areas between the buildings which seemed as clean as the people. He decided to go as far as the canal—Keizersgracht—and double back. A two-block memorial troll, for it was from that canal that Herbert Whitlock's ody had been taken three weeks ago. Herbert Whitlock, American minor official with a travel office, perhaps drank too many *genevers* and was overtaken by the wallop of Dutch gin. Perhaps. But Herbert Whitlock was an AXEman and actually disliked alcohol. Nick had worked with him twice and they had shared a laugh when Nick said, "Imagine a guy who has to force himself to drink in the line of duty!" Herb had been in Europe nearly a year, searching for the leak which landed in AXE's hands when military electronics and space data began to fall through the hole. Herb had reached the M file of suspects when he died. And the second name in it was—Manson's.

David Hawk, from his command post at the center of the AXE web had put it simply. "Take all the time you want, Nicholas. Call for help if you need it. We just won't permit this sort of thing." The thin lips had tightened

above the strong jaw for an instant. "If you can, when you get close to results, call me in."

Nick saluted Keizersgracht, made a promise and strolled back past Herengracht. The air was honey sweet. Here I am, he thought. Take another shot at me now. You get the shot and if you miss, I may get a lead. It's a fair gamble. He stopped and admired a cart of flowers, turned slowly, a big carefree man taking the sun. Nothing happened. He frowned and went into the hotel.

In a big, comfortable room with none of the quickie-veneer and brittle-plastic effect of some of the "ultra-modern" hotels, Nick unpacked. Wilhelmina, his Luger, had come through customs strapped under his arm. Hugo, a razor-sharp stiletto, masqueraded as a paper knife in his writing case. He stripped to his shorts and washed, deciding that he could accomplish little before meeting Amlie at three. He would exercise for fifteen minutes and sleep for an hour.

There was a discreet tap on the door. Nick called, "Hello?"

"Room service."

He opened the door. A stocky waiter in a white coat stood smiling, holding a large spray of flowers and a bottle of Dewars partly hidden by a white napkin. "Welcome to Amsterdam. Compliments of the hotel—"

Nick stepped back. The man took the flowers and Scotch to the window table. Nick's eyebrows shot up. No vase? No tray? "Hey—"

The man dropped the bottle with a bump, but it did not break. Nick's eyes followed it The door slammed open, knocked him almost off his feet. A man sprang through the opening—a wide and solid man who looked like the bucko mate on a tough ship He held a black automatic low and firm. It was a big gun and it followed Nick without wavering as he pretended to stumble, gathered himself. A smaller man came in behind the brawny one and closed the door From the direction of the

waiter a voice said sharply in English, "Stand still, Mr. Kent."

From the corner of his eye Nick saw that the napkin had dropped. The hand it had covered held a gun, and it too looked as if it were backed by a professional—steady, level, ready. Nick stood still.

He had one ace. In the pocket of his shorts was one of the deadly gas pellets—a "Pierre." He eased a hand down.

The waiter-type said, "Stop it. Don't move a single muscle."

He sounded definite. Nick froze. He said, "I only have a few guilders. In my—"

"Shut up."

The last man through the door had circled behind Nick and there was nothing he could do about it at the moment—not in the cross-fire of two pistols that appeared to be in competent hands. Something looped around one of his wrists, dragged it behind him and encircled his other arm with the smooth efficiency of a boatswain throwing a itch on a dock post. The rope drew tight. It felt like ylon. And the man who had thrown those knots on him was either a sailor or he had practiced for years. For one of the few times in his career, Nicholas Huntington Carter III, N3 of AXE, was secured and almost helpless!

The wide man said, "Sit down. There."

Nick sat. Apparently waiter-type and wide-boy shared command. They proceeded to inspect his belongings with minute care. They were not destructive. After checking every pocket and the seams of his two suits they even hung them up again. They read every word in "Norman Kent's" slim business file. After ten minutes of careful searching the wide one sat down opposite Nick. He had very little neck, just folds of thick flesh between his collar and his head, but they didn't look like fat. The guns had disappeared. He said, "Mr. Norman Kent. Of New York. How long have you known Amlie de Boer?"

"One day. We met on a plane."

"When will you see her again?"

"I don't know."

"Is that why she gave you this?" Thick fingers held up the card Amlie had given him with her local address written on it.

"We're going to get together sometime. She's a good looker."

"Are you here to do business with Manson's?"

"I'm here to do business with anybody who will sell my company diamonds at the right price. Who are you? Police, thieves, spies?"

"Maybe a little of all three. But let's say the Mafia. Don't they get blamed for everything anyway?"

"What do you want with me?"

The burly man pointed to where Wilhelmina rested on the bed. "An odd item for a businessman."

"Who may carry tens of thousands of dollars in diamonds? I like it."

"Against the laws."

"I'm cautious."

"What do you know about the Yenisei Cullinans?"

"I've got 'em."

If he had said he was a man from outer space they couldn't have jumped higher The brawny one stood straight up. The "waiter" exclaimed, "Yah?" The sailor who had tied the knots dropped his jaw two inches.

The wide one said, "You *got* them? Already? Where?"

"Checked at the Grand Krasnapolsky. You can't get 'em."

The big man took a tin case out of his pocket, passed small cigars to the others, and seemed on the verge of offering Nick one. They lit up. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Take them to the U.S. of course"

"But—but you cannot! Customs—ah! You have a plan. It is all arranged?"

"It is all arranged," Nick agreed gravely.

The big man seemed indignant. They are all nuts, Nick thought, or I am. But nuts or not they know their business. He unobtrusively tugged on the line across his back. Not an inch of give.

Big man blew dark blue smoke slowly from heavy, pursed lips. "We cannot get them, no. But you can. Where is the check? Your receipt?"

"There is none. Mynheer Stahl is doing me a favor." Many years back Stahl had managed the Krasnapolsky. Nick hoped he was still around.

The one who had played waiter said suddenly, "I think he's lying. Let's gag him and burn his toes awhile and then see what he says."

"No," the big man said. "He was in the Krasnapolsky a long time. With Amlie. I saw him. This will be a bright feather in our caps. Now—" He came close to Nick. "—Mr. Kent you are going to get dressed and we are going over and get the Cullinans. All four of us. You are a big young man and maybe you want to be a hero for your company. If you do you will be a dead one. We don't trouble. Probably you are insured. But anyway—remember what I have just said."

He backed to a wall of the room, motioned the waiter to another. They did not do Nick the honor of taking out their guns. The sailor undid the square knot at Nick's back and took the clove hitches from his wrists. Circulation tingled. The big man said, "Get dressed. The Luger is not loaded. Move carefully."

Nick moved carefully. He reached for his shirt hanging on a chair back and then placed an edge-of-the-palm slash alongside the throat of the waiter-type. It was a spectacular attack, as if a member of the Peking champion Ping-Pong team delivered a backhand chop to a net ball, starting six feet back of the table. Nick stepped, leaped, slammed—and the man's neck moved hardly at all before the blow hit its exact target.

Nick whirled across the front of the falling man and clamped a grip on the big man's hand as it came up from his side coat pocket. The man's eyes widened as he felt the crushing power of the lock. A strong man himself, he knew muscle when it bore down. He brought up a short, straight piston-punch that Nick was evading before it left home.

Nick let it swing up and hooked a right just in under the ribcage, below the heart. There was not time for a better blow, and anyway that neckless torso was designed as a defense against chops. The man grunted, but Nick's fist felt as if he had slammed it into a side of beef on a hook.

The sailor was rushing in, waving some sort of a weighted sap. Nick heaved the big man around, shoved, and the two of them collided while he was left with a side of the man's coat—and the gun tangled in the pocket. Nick hurled the gun through the window. Might as well advertise this brawl The two men separated themselves and came at him low, hard and fast. They had been around a lot. When they pulled up short to place their blows Nick kicked the sailor in the kneecap because he was closer and dodged around him away from the larger opponent. The big man stepped over the yelling sailor, set himself solidly and rushed at Nick with his big arms spread. Nick feinted forward as if to meet him, locked his left hand against a right that felt as if it belonged to a power-shovel and then back-pedaled with a side twist that put his right foot into the man's stomach while his right hand carried the other's left wrist right on by.

Skidding sideways, four hundred pounds of hurtling man-meat smashed through a chair, a coffee table, swept a TV and its table out of the way as if it were a matchbox toy and crashed to a halt in the ruins of the desk-bureau combination that splintered against the wall wi[illegible]nd, grinding crunch. Riding on Nick's foot and [illegible] his grips, the big man was the point for most

on the furniture. It took him a second longer than Nick to get up.

Nick sprang, slid an arm alongside his throat while jacking the near arm into the hair where it waved helplessly for a moment. A moment was all Nick needed—when they fell to the floor Nick's forearm was locked alongside the man's neck, Nick's other hand gripped his own wrist. It was a hold that should shut off the man's wind and blood supply in ten seconds.

He didn't get ten seconds. Gasping and choking the waiter-type revived enough to grope for his gun. Nick unwrapped himself, slammed his adversary's head against the floor hopefully and grabbed a gun arm as it came out past a coat lapel. The first shot went between them, the next two into the ceiling, and Nick threw that gun through the other, unbroken window. They would need air if this kept up. Didn't anyone in this hotel ever *listen* to anything?

The waiter punched him in the stomach. If he hadn't watched the blow delivered he might not have known it hit. He put his palm under the man's chin and popped im backward at the big man who was coming from the 'all like a bull at a cape. Nick started to dodge in what he thought might be a graceful Veronica when his foot caught in the TV wreckage. Big man would have gored him in the appendix if he had had the horns. As they toppled against the bed the room's door opened and a woman's scream burst in, then withdrew as she fled. Nick and the bull were tangled in spread, blankets and pillows.

His adversary was slow. Nick saw the sailor crawling toward the door. Where was waiter-type? Desperately Nick ripped at the spread that insisted on coming up with him. BLAM! The lights went out.

He was shaken and blind for only a few seconds magnificent physical condition kept him almost cons as he wagged his head and pushed himself up fror

. So *that's* where the waiter went! He got the sailor's
and crowned me with it. When I reach *him*—
e sagged, sat on the floor for a moment, took several
o breaths. Somewhere a woman was shouting, scream-
. Feet sounded, running away. He blinked and blinked
il he could see, staggered erect. The room was empty.
By the time he had given his head a good soaking in
ld water the room wasn't empty any longer There was
e maid who had screamed, two bellmen, a manager and
s assistant, a security man and a housekeeper. As he
ried himself, put on his robe and hid Wilhelmina while
retending to untangle his shirt from the bed mess, the
police arrived.

They kept him busy for an hour. The manager gave him a fresh room and insisted on sending up a doctor. Everyone was polite, sympathetic and angry at the smear on the good name of Amsterdam. Nick grinned and thanked everybody He gave the CD man accurate descriptions and wished him well. He refused to look at mug shots, claiming it had all happened too swiftly. The CD man studied the chaos, then closed his report book and said in slow English, "But not too swiftly, Mr Kent. They have gotten away now, but we may find them at a hospital."

Nick distributed his belongings in his new room, left a call for two and went to sleep When the operator aroused him he felt fine—not even a headache. He had coffee sent up while he showered.

The address Amlie had given him was an immaculat toy house out on Wibaustraat past the Olympic Stadium She met him in a neat hall so aglow with varnish, pai and polish it demanded to be packed away in tiss paper. "Let's go and take advantage of the daylight," s said. "You can come up for a drink if you like when get back."

"I know I'll like."

She led him to a blue Vauxhall Cresta which she dr

... caution. In form-fitting chartreuse sweater and pleated skirt, with her hair secured by a small salmon-hued scarf, she looked more lovely than she had on the plane. Very British, prim and sexier than in the linen mini-skirt.

He watched her features and profile for a moment as she drove. No wonder Manson's used her as a model. She pointed out landmarks proudly. "There's Ooster Park ... now the Zoo, see ... it has one of the best collections of animals in the world. We are going northwest toward the center of the city again. Do you see how the canals and streets are laid out in a plan? The ancient planners were far-seeing. And there ... Rembrandt's house."

Nick acknowledged each point of interest. The outer city was as he remembered it; colorful, fascinating, with an air that said those who lived here understood that life had a past and a future, not just a today.

She drove him past the docks, circled the busier canals where a man could spend a day just watching the passing parade, showed him the expanses of land reclaimed from he sea. As she drove past the North Sea Canal and turned ack she said, "There's a saying—God created the earth but the Dutch created The Netherlands."

"You're tremendously proud of the country, Amlie. You'd make a good guide for American Express."

"It's so different, Norman. For generations these people have fought the sea. No wonder they're stubborn. But they're alive and clean and energetic—"

"And some of them are gullible and superstitious just like other human beings. After all, monarchies have been going out of style."

She sulked until they stopped at the Old Dutch restaurant in the Trianon for dinner. No one can sulk through an *oude genever* martini, served amid blue and white tile under old beams where the gaily flowered red chairs are filled with cheerful people; followed by a trip to the buffet table—as long as a bowling alley—covered with hot and

cold seafood, meats, cheeses, dips, salads, meat pies and innumerable pretty dishes offering every known taste blend. It was supposed to be just the beginning.

After two trips to the table, excellent beer and a look at the massive offering of pastries, Nick quit. "I've got to get into condition to put away the meals around here."

"This is really an excellent but inexpensive restaurant. Wait till you try our duck and partridge and lobster and Zeeland oysters—"

"Later, my dear. Much later. But there you go again. *Our* duck. You're a real Dutch-American."

"Let me show you how to speak it—"

Stuffed and content they drove out the old road to Vinkeveen. When they left the city she stopped and suggested that Nick drive. He discovered that the car handled well.

It happened on an empty stretch of road which Amlie told him would take them back toward town. The car came from behind, a man motioned *stop* and forced them to the edge of the highway. Nick debated a fast reverse; rejected the idea. He wasn't that familiar with the car for fast action, and anyway—you could always learn something if you didn't get killed.

The man who had waved got out and came to them. He looked like a police official in a standard TV quickie. He even took out the usual small Mauser as he said, "The girl comes with us. No trouble, please."

Nick smiled at him. "Okay." He turned to Amlie. "You know them?"

Her tones were shrill. "No, Norman. No!"

The man came just a little too close to the door. Nick whipped it open, heard it clonk against the gun as his feet hit the road. The odds were good. When they talk about "no trouble" and "please" they aren't ready for quick murder. Might even have their gun on safety. If your reflexes are honed and you're in condition and you've spent hours, days, practicing for just such situations—

The gun didn't go off. The man pinwheeled over Nick's hip and slammed onto the ground with a force that meant a concussion or close to it. The Mauser fell to the side. Nick kicked it under the Vauxhall and ran around the other car, drawing Wilhelmina. The driver was either very smart or a coward—anyway a bad type to be partners with. He gunned the engine and left Nick staggering in exhaust fumes.

Nick reholstered Wilhelmina and bent over the man on the ground who lay very still, his breath straining. Swiftly Nick emptied his pockets—taking everything he could find, searching the belt for cases, clips or a badge. He threw the little collection on the seat, jumped back into the car and took off after the taillights in the distance. The Vauxhall was fast—but not fast enough.

Amlie had been saying things. "Oh my heavens! In The Netherlands! We don't have this. Let's get the police. Who was that? Why? So sudden. How did you ever manage that, Norman? Would he have shot us?"

By the time she ran down he was parking the car. He kept her quiet going through the lobby of the hotel Die Port van Cleve. It took a Scotch and a half in his room before she stopped gulping, shivering and babbling.

Meanwhile he looked through the collection of items he had taken from the man with the Mauser. Nothing. The usual stuff from pockets—cigarettes, pen, pocket knife, notebook, matches. The notebook was bare—not a written line. The matches advertised motor oil. He shook his head. "Not the law. I didn't think so. They don't behave like that although some incompetent might. We couldn't take any chances." He refilled their drinks and sat beside her on the long couch. If the room were bugged, the soft music from the hi-fi channel should garble their words. He asked, "Why would they want you, Amlie?"

"I—I don't know."

"That wasn't just a holdup, you know. He said, 'The girl comes with us.' Now you're rape-bait if I ever saw

any, but even those types don't pick out a car on a road. They wanted *you*."

Amlie's beauty was the in-depth kind that improved in anger or fear. Nick watched the misty clouds that fogged her eyes and lips with worry but did not soften the firm set of her chin. "I—I can't think who—"

"Are you holding any business secrets?"

She gulped. Shook her head. Nick debated asking the next question: *Have you found out anything you shouldn't know?* Then he rejected it. That was too close to the bone. She was suspicious of "Norman Kent" already. Her next words proved it She said slowly, "Norman—you moved awfully fast out there. And I saw your gun. Who are you?"

He put his arm around her. She seemed to welcome it. "Just a Yankee businessman, Amlie. One of the old types. The kind that stripped the coasts of Africa and faced millions of Chinese with a few small cannon and a lot of nerve based on greed. When I carry diamonds, for instance, nobody takes them away from me while I'm alive."

She shuddered. Nick stretched out his legs. He rather liked the picture he had painted. He wanted to add *and if they won't give you the merchandise, send for the Marines*; but he felt that it would ruin the heroic image. He brought over his free hand and patted her. "Relax, Amlie. That was a disturbing scene. That one who hit the road won't bother you or anyone for a few weeks. We can tell the police—or keep quiet. Do you think you ought to tell Phil Laansma about it?"

It was the key question. She was silent for a long time. Her head tilted onto his shoulder. She sighed. "I don't know. He should be warned if they're after Manson's. But how will it look?"

"Odd."

"That's what I mean. Phil is modern. S[illegible] He's not the old-style Continental director in [illegible]

high collar and starched mind. But what will he think of an employee who is *selected* for abduction? Certainly it's not Manson's cup of tea. You ought to see the personnel checks he uses in New York. Detectives and consultant snoops and all that. I mean—Phil is a swinger personally but not where business is concerned. And I like my job."

"Think he'd fire you?"

"No . . . not quite that."

"But when it came to promotion. Your future. He might be influenced."

"Yes. I've built a good record. Reliable. Efficient. This would be the first wrong note."

"Please don't get angry now." Nick spoke soothingly and chose his words carefully. "I think you've been warmer with Phil than—just friends. And you're a magnificent woman, Amlie. Any chance of his being jealous? Hidden resentment, perhaps, of even a guy like me?"

She thought that over. "No. I'm—I'm sure not. Phil and I—we've had a few—parties. Just—what comes natu-ally at his place on long weekends. He's really very nice. teresting. So—"

"And he's known about you and—a few others?"

"He knows I'm a free agent, if that's what you mean." There was a small chill in the words.

Nick applied gloss. "Phil doesn't look like the dangerously jealous type. He's too much of a polished cosmopolitan. Broad-minded. A man in his position would never let himself or his firm get involved in anything shady. Or illegal. So we can rule him out."

She was quiet too long. That picture made her think.

"Yes," she said at last, but it was just a word.

"How about others in the shop, though? I meant w said about you. You're a shockingly attractive g wouldn't be unusual for some man or lad to go ov for you. Someone you least suspect. Or someor been out with only a few times. Maybe someor Manson's. Women often sense these things s

ly. Now think about it. Eyes that follow you whenever you're around. Extra attentions."

"No . . . there might be, I guess. But we've been . . . a happy family. I've never rejected anyone. No, I don't mean that. If anyone showed—extra interest or affection for me I'd be extra kind. I like to be liked. Do I make sense?"

"Perfectly. And somehow I can agree that you don't have a hidden admirer who might turn dangerous and certainly you don't have enemies The kind of girl who develops them is partly hollow. The brittle near-the-edges kind who covers it up with teasing Gets a kick out of men losing their controls over her. The girls who wrote the Dear John letters."

Amlie's eyes were misty as they confronted his own. "Norman—you understand."

It was a satisfying kiss and a long one The release from tension and the sharing of problems helped, Nick knew, but wow! She used those perfect lips like warm waves bathing a shore She came against him with sighs and moist cheeks and surrender and acceptance without a trace of falsity. She smelled like flowers after an early summer rain and she felt like the kind of woman Mohammed promised to his troops to keep his desert cavalrymen charging against concentrated fire. If you go down—zap—and into her arms! She caused a catch in Nick's throat and a faster beat to his breath as she melted her long length against him with a sighing deliverance

It seemed like years ago she had said *I mean a relationship that's fun and you're strong friends and you can talk to each other. And if you get the urge and want to plan any special way to do it tonight you talk about it. When the time comes, you can communicate.*

There was no need for talk this night. When he unbuttoned his shirt she helped him and shed the chartreuse sweater and her front-clip bra with unhurried but unhesitant purpose. His breath stumbled again at what was

revealed in the soft glow. The fountains. The source. He tried to drink, delicately and savoring the taste of her as gardens of flowers crushed against his face and made color patterns even though his eyes were closed. Allah—you deliver! It was the softest, most fragrant cloud he had ever fallen through.

When at last, floating together through a series of casual strippings and tossings they blended skin and bodies on the bed he was intrigued to hear her murmur, "Oh it's quite different. So nice—I thought it would be."

He swam deeper into saturated depths, replying, "I thought so too, Amlie. I know now why you're so beautiful. It's not veneer. You're abundant. Solid."

"You make me feel—"

He didn't remember because they felt it.

Later against a pink ear he murmured, "Sweet solid. Sweet solid. That's you, Amlie."

She sighed and turned to him again. "Real loving." She rolled the words along her tongue. "I know what it is. It's not finding the right lover—it's being the right lover."

"Copyright that," he whispered, closing his lips on

ctal.

Chapter 2

It was a marvelous morning to have breakfast in bed with a beautiful girl. A blazing sun snapped hot sparklers through the windows. The room-service cart, ordered with help from Amlie, was a rolling buffet table stocked with delicacies ranging from buns to beer and ham to herring.

After savoring his second cup of excellent coffee, served lovingly by a completely nude and unself-conscious Amlie, Nick said: "You'll be late for work. What if the boss discovers you weren't home last night?"

Soft hands pressed the sides of his face, feeling the stubble. She looked into his eyes, made an impish grin. "Don't worry about me I don't punch a clock on this side of the ocean and I don't have a telephone in my apartment. On purpose. I like my *freedom*."

Nick kissed her, then eased her back a few inches—if he kept on, they'd never get up "I hate to mention them, but have you thought about those two buckos who tried to grab you last night? Who were they working for? They were after *you*—let's not kid ourselves. The stuff from the guy's pockets doesn't tell us a thing."

He watched the pretty smile fade from her lips. He liked her. As she knelt over him on the big bed he liked her especially; the plump fullness of her curves and arcs seen from the prone position formed an artist's dream. It was a shame to erase the pink glow from that face

and let the sombre mask of worry replace it. If only she would tell him all she knew—yet if he pressed too hard for it, she'd flee from him.

She caught a bit of one lip under white teeth for an instant. It gave her a look of concentrated worry—more problems than a pretty girl should have. "I never saw them before," she said slowly. "I've been thinking about them too. We can't be sure they knew me. Perhaps they just wanted—a girl."

"You don't really believe that, even if you want to. Those boys were in the business. Not the kind of professionals you find in the big time in the U.S.A., but sharp enough. They wanted *you*. They weren't rummies or hot pants boys in their beer looking for a blonde. They picked their spot and made their move."

"And you stopped them," she observed.

"They don't usually bump into a Boston lad who used to fight for fun with the Irish and Italian boys in the North End. We learned how to really take care of ourselves there. They were unlucky."

The worry was all over her now, like a coat of gray transparent plastic. It took the glow off. He thought there was fear in her eyes as well. She murmured, "I'm glad I'm going back to New York in a week."

"That's no protection. They can have you cut up into small chunks long before that. Or if somebody is bulldoggy about it, they can follow you to New York. *Think*, sweetheart. Who wants to hurt you?"

"I—I don't know."

"You don't have an enemy in the world?"

"No." She didn't mean it.

Nick sighed. He said, "You'd better talk to me, Amlie. I think you're going to need a friend and it may be that I'm one of your best bets. When I went to my hotel yesterday three guys jumped me in the room. Their key question was—how long have I known you?"

She sank back on her haunches, suddenly pale, her

breath held in and then expelled with a nervous spasm. "You didn't tell me—who—?"

"I could pull the old one about you didn't ask. It will probably be in the papers today. Visiting businessman victim of robbery attempt. I didn't tell the police that they asked about you Now I'm going to describe them to you. See if you recognize any of them—"

He drew clear word pictures. The waiter-type, sailorman and no-neck gorilla. He looked at her as he talked, apparently casual, but observing every change of expression and movement. He wouldn't bet on it, but he decided she knew at least one of them. Would she level with him? He concluded, " . . . I'd say the sailor doesn't go to sea any more and the waiter doesn't wait. They've found a better racket. No-neck is the boss of the team And there's money in it. The clothes I just described were of good quality. I ripped most of the coat off one of them. Nice wool worsted. No label "

"Oh-h-h." Her mouth was a worried rose, her eyes gloomy violets. "I—I don't know anyone who looks like them."

Nick sighed. "Amlie, you're in trouble. *We're* in trouble. Those lads meant business and they may be back Whoever shot at us at Schiphol may be around for another go. His aim may be better next time "

"Do you think it was really meant—to kill—"

"It wasn't just a threat. They meant business I don't think I have any deadly enemies in town." He thought to himself: I ought to cross my fingers or legs, I may have a double-dozen. Anyway, she's too pretty to disturb with any legs and I'm not superstitious. "So that leaves you and Jacobus. I think it was you. The slug was close to us. It went high as they often do when you're trying to pick a target out of a crowd and don't want to pot the wrong victim. The gunner may have been in a car or truck. If he could have found a high spot—like they did ;.

they'd have had you cold. Think about it. There might be a next time."

She was trembling. "Oh—no."

You could see the circuits working behind the blue eyes, relays and cores selecting and rejecting madly, patterns forming and reforming swiftly in her brain—the most complex computer in the world which makes man's devices look like an abacus.

He programmed an overload and said, "What are the Yenisei Cullinans?"

Fuses were blowing. "The what? I don't know."

"I imagine they're diamonds of some kind. Think."

"I—I seem to remember a Cullinan. But—no—it doesn't ring a bell—"

"Can you look them up, see if there are famous crown jewels or big stones or special settings with a name like that?"

"Oh yes. We have a library at the office."

She had answered automatically. If he dared fire key questions at her now he might get answers—and he might overload an intricate portion of the delicate device. The billions of relays packed into a delicate gray, misshapen ball can be instantly stalled by an amateur. The eye-lights will flash NO—TILT—REJECT. And you're through with that one.

Her arms were braced on the bed beside his chest. He admired the sheen of her golden hair as she shook her head. She said, "I'll have to tell Phil about this. It may involve Manson's."

"You've changed your mind about telling him of your adventures?"

"It wouldn't be fair to the firm . . . not to tell. It may be part of . . . a robbery plot or something."

The eternal woman, Nick thought. Smokescreens and subterfuges. "Do me a favor, Amlie. Call Manson's and see if my credit is okay."

Her head came up. "How did you know—?"

"First thing a smart company would do Will you call?"

"Yes." She clambered off the bed. Nick stretched and enjoyed the view. She spoke rapidly in Dutch. He heard, "... Algemene Bank Nederland ..."

She hung up and turned to him. "Constant says your credit is approved. The Bard Galleries have a hundred thousand dollars on deposit and a letter of credit for more."

"Did we pick the leading bank?"

"They have twenty-five offices in Amsterdam alone."

"So I'm a welcome customer now?"

"Yes." She picked up her bra and started to dress, her motions slow and preoccupied. "Phil will be glad to sell you anything you want, I'm sure." She wondered why Phil had sent Oom Myer and two helpers to accost Nick. And that bullet at the airport? She shivered Did someone at Manson's know that she had discovered what Kelley included in the engravings? She refused to believe Phil was involved, yet—who else? She had better not tell *him* she recognized Nick's description of Oom. Keep that as a secret weapon The police would like to know it. By the time she gave Nick a long good-by kiss, before completing her lipstick, she had regained her poise.

He said, "I'll be along in a half hour. We tell Laansma the truth, eh? Except about where you spent last night?"

"Yes. I think we must."

"Okay, Amlie. You're the best judge of your own situation."

He wondered if she believed that.

Michel Eduard Oom Myer squirmed under the scornful remarks of Philipine Laansma. He bumped one expensive shoe against the other. It helped him to remain calm—only in the last few years had he enjoyed an income which allowed him to live as a man should. He ran a [illegible] across the back of his neck that almost wasn't any [illegible]ll; i[illegible] came away damp from the heavy folds of f[illegible]

not to talk to him like this. He could smash the dapper man into nothing with one blow. No, no—he mustn't think like a fool. Phil had the brains and the money. He winced as Laansma spat words at him like pellets of dung. " . . . my force. Three imbeciles. Or two imbeciles and a cretin—you—to lead them. What idiocy! You fired the shot yourself?"

"Yes."

"With the muffled Browning?"

"Yes."

"You once told me you could drive nails with it at a hundred yards. How far were you from her head—a bigger target?"

"Two hundred yards."

"Liar." Laansma slow-marched back and forth in his plush office with precise strides. Not for an instant did he think of letting Oom know that he was glad he missed that ill-conceived shot, or that he had changed his first impressions of Norman Kent. When he had left the breakfast table to call Oom and order him to check on Kent when he reached the Die Port van Cleve, he had been certain that Kent was a counterespionage man.

Just as he had been sure that Amlie had discovered, at Kelley's studio, how complex and voluminous data and diagrams could be transmitted in the microdots of engravings. He was proud of the pipeline, as he thought of it, for it was his own invention. His customers included the Russians, and South Africa, and Spain and three middle-eastern countries. So simple and so profitable, and it led to interesting sidelines, like Groot and his stolen Cullinans.

Groot! Philipine squared his shoulders. He thought he could peddle his loot to the highest bidder. Let him dream. Groot was a capable spy but when it came to matching brains with a man like himself—hah!

Now—as soon as he figured out what kind of a terminal to use, he would rent his pipeline to the Americans and the British and couriers could carry data both ways!

The CIA would adore it. The British MIs needed new patterns, they had only one left that was truly efficient.

Laansma did an almost military about-face. Firm, fearless, but flexible! Be more than you seem! The old German general staff selected the right maxims. Groot was right about that.

Flexible! Amlie was evidently still of use—just nervous. Kent was a tough American playboy with money to spend for diamonds. So! A small, significant, instantaneous change in tactics. And he would use Oom's two failures as weapons. The brute was getting cocky.

He watched Oom rotate his big hands, rubbing one on the other. "You need practice shooting," Laansma said. "Some day you may meet someone who shoots back."

Oom could not meet his eyes "I aimed at the head. It would have been stupid to wound and I couldn't aim lower."

"I would have done as well with hirelings off the Hamburg docks. What a mess at the hotel! He made fools of you."

"He isn't an ordinary man. He must be from Interpol"

"You found no proof New York says Kent *is* a buyer for Bard. A high-living young man A hunter and boxer. You don't understand Americans, Oom. One off the street makes you—call yourself a professional—look like a girl slapping her tennis partner for a goose. Three of you! Ha!"

"He has a gun."

"A man like Kent might Our police take guns away from Americans every month You know that. Tell me again what he said about the Cullinans."

"He said, 'I got 'em.'"

"You moron. I would have told you if he had them."

"You said we wouldn't see them till we got to Geesteren so I thought maybe he—"

"Maybe he had outwitted *me!*"

"Well not like that but—"

"[illegible]!" Philipine liked to give such commands. They [illegible] feel like a German officer he had watched come [illegible] billet near Reichswald and silence his whole [illegible]—troops, civilians and horses—with a word. [illegible]ied his knuckles.

"[illegible] once more," Laansma ordered. "Did he ever even *say* diamonds?" He watched Oom closely, wondered for a moment if the man might be more than he seemed. He had never let Oom know anything about his special communications pipeline. He used the hulking fellow as a messenger occasionally to contacts within Holland, but that was all. Oom's thick brows came together like gray slugs touching noses.

"No. Just that he left *them* at the Krasnapolsky."

"Not in the safe. Not locked up."

"No. Nothing about how they were kept. Just that they were with Stahl."

"Who knows nothing about it. I checked with him. Unobtrusively—a procedure you wouldn't even understand." Laansma sighed with the weighty ponderance of a general forced to make a difficult decision and convincing himself that what he did was wise. "All right, Oom. Take Beppo and Mack to the farm in the big Citroën. Stay there. I don't want your faces around the city for awhile. Go out by the private gate and don't stop off anywhere."

"Yes, sir." Oom left quickly.

Laansma got up and paced his big office, puffing gently on the cigar, stepping slowly on the thick carpet. He followed the rich wood paneling with his eyes. It failed to give him a feeling of security and success, as it usually did. He took up a position at the right distance from a Dufy original, studying the masterful color work. His spine was straight, his chin in and his weight even on his feet. He failed to feel lucky—just jealous. The games were getting dangerous. Amlie had discovered too much, yet he dare not ask her about it. It had been a practical idea to

have her eliminated, if—he convinced himself—it had gone off smoothly.

Yet it looked as if he might ride out the winds after all. If she had talked in New York and Norman Kent had been sent with her, they would have made their move by now. They had all the evidence they needed right in the artist's case she had carried on the plane! Whew. He patted away perspiration from his forehead with a spotless handkerchief, replaced it with another from a drawer.

The intercom announced Amlie. Laansma said, "In a moment." He went into his private suite and studied his handsome features in the mirror He must pay more attention to Amlie. He had kept it casual because he did not believe in strong alliances with those beneath him. He would warm it up—and that would be pleasant, because she was among the greatest in bed.

He went to the door to greet her. "Amlie! Darling. Ah *beste* it's good to have you alone for a moment." He kissed her on the cheek. She looked puzzled for a moment, then smiled—without brightness

"It's nice to be in Amsterdam, Phil. You know how I love it."

"And you brought a customer with you. You have an eye for business, my sweet. Mr. Kent's references are excellent. Sooner or later they will favor us with some business, I am sure. Sit down, Amlie." He held her chair for her, lit her cigarette. Jesus, she was beautiful! He stepped into his suite for an instant and checked his brown mustache and white teeth with a quick series of grimaces.

Amlie said as he stepped back around the door, "I've been talking with Mr. Kent. I imagine he might develop into a good customer."

"Do you think he just happened to have the seat next to you on the plane?"

"I think so." Amlie had pondered this. "If he wanted to

contact Manson's that was a complicated way to do it. If he wanted to sit next to me—I'm flattered."

"He's a powerful man. Physically, I mean."

"I noticed. We went sightseeing yesterday afternoon and he told me that three men had tried to hold him up in his room. Someone shot at him or me at Schiphol. And last evening two men tried to abduct me."

Laansma's eyebrows jumped when she mentioned the last attempt at abducting her. He had been prepared to act astonished—now he didn't have to act, he was. "Amlie! Who? Why?"

"The men who attacked him at his hotel asked about me. And about something called the Yenisei Cullinans. Do you recognize them?"

She watched him closely. Phil was a magnificent actor—and how she had once trusted him! His polish and suave generosity used to fool her completely. Revelation had come to her with a jolt when she had unexpectedly visited Kelley's Color Engraving studios in New York. She had discovered their connection with Manson's and the unusu- engravings that were inserted in her carrying case. erhaps Phil didn't know about it but thinking back, re-evaluating some things he had said and done, she believed he was part of the scheme. She hated him for it. Her nerves had twitched horribly until she had handed the case over to him.

Laansma smiled warmly—friendly reassurance in his expression. "The Yeniseis are diamonds. Allegedly for sale, but you know how stories float around in this business. More important—how do you know someone shot at you at Schiphol?"

"Norman said he heard a bullet."

"You call him Norman? That's nice. He is—"

"We agreed on first names when we met at the Krasnapolsky. Remember? And he is a charming man."

She knew a dart like that pricked Laansma and she couldn't resist placing it, like a female picador. She sud-

denly realized how self-centered he was. He hated compliments about other men, except when he made them himself as business flattery. Laansma smoothed a corner of his mustache with a little finger. "You were with him. Did you hear anything?"

"I'm not sure. I thought it was a plane."

"I see. And the men at his hotel or on the road. Any idea who they might have been? Perhaps robbers or rapists? Amsterdam isn't what it used to be. We have them—"

"No The first three asked for me by name."

"The ones on the road did not?"

"No. They just said 'the girl comes with us.' "

"Amlie, I think we may all be facing a problem. When you go back to the States next Tuesday I had planned to have you carry an especially valuable shipment. One of the biggest we've ever moved. Ever since I assembled them there have been suspicious things happening. These may be part of the plot, although how it all connects I don't see." He hoped she believed him. Anyway, it should confuse her and Kent.

Amlie was shaken. There had been a number of thefts and robberies in the past year—more than usual. The loyalty she had developed for Manson's increased her gullibility. "Oh! But how? We had nothing with us when I left the plane except—" She bit it off. She had been about to say *those engravings.*

"Who can tell how the criminal mind works? Perhaps to offer you a tremendous bribe Perhaps to drug you or hypnotize you so you would cooperate later on. Heaven only knows the evil things that are available."

"What will we do?"

"Did you or Kent report the shot or the men on the road to the police?"

She was not so shaken that she overlooked his failure to ask about the affair at the hotel Did he *know* Norman reported that? Suspicion steadied her. She could swallow again. "No. There didn't seem to be much point to it."

"Probably you should have. But it's a bit late to do it now. Norman will be here shortly—if he keeps our appointment. Let's see what he says . . ."

"Norman" showed up on time. They shared a bountiful Dutch second breakfast in Laansma's office and discussed events. Nick learned nothing new—and Laansma remained on his prime suspect list. Laansma said he was giving Amlie a guard for the balance of her stay and Nick suggested politely, "You can withdraw him when Amlie is showing me the sights. I'll be responsible for her."

"From what I hear," Laansma observed, hiding his jealousy even from himself, "you are an excellent bodyguard."

Nick shrugged and chuckled. "You know these primitive Americans. Always ready for violence."

Amlie left them on that note, agreeing to meet Nick at six. Under Laansma's guidance Nick viewed more magnificent diamonds than he had known existed. They visited cutters and other houses, and Laansma was frank in pointing out good values and interesting selections. Nick noticed that there was very little difference in pricing. When they returned to Manson's after a hearty late lunch at the *Waroeng-Djawa*—rijsttafel with twenty-four items—Nick said, "Thank you for your time, Phil. I've learned a lot. Let's do business."

Laansma blinked. "You've made a decision?"

"Yes. A decision to learn what firms my company can trust. So let's select a lot. Say thirty thousand dollars worth of those stones you showed me. We'll find out damn soon if you're doing us right or wrong. If it's right you've got a long-term customer. If wrong you and I are still friends—but we won't do any business."

Laansma laughed. "It's the old Venetian. You're making me balance my greed against my business judgment."

"Yep. It works with substantial firms. You don't use it in the street."

"All right, Norman. I'll select the stones in the morning and you can go over them with your glass and I'll explain

them so you'll be able to inform your people. It's too late to do it today—"

"Of course. And Phil—please have a batch of small white envelopes that I can write on. I'm going to put down your remarks about each stone or group of stones."

"Certainly. You may not talk the language but you know business. We'll get along, Norman. What will you do now? See more of Europe? Go home?"

"I'll be leaving soon."

"You're not in any hurry?"

"Not especially—"

"Then I'd like to suggest two things Come out to my country place over the weekend. We have a lot of fun. Tennis, horses, golf. And ballooning. One-man jobs. Ever try it?"

"No."

"You'll get a kick out of it." He put his arm on Nick's shoulder. "I read you, Norman. You like new adventures. And occasionally—new beautiful women. Blondes included. Right?"

"Right."

"Then here's my second suggestion. It's really a request for a favor. I'm going to send Amlie to the States carrying a big selection of diamonds. Really big. I think someone is planning to steal them. Your adventures recently may be part of the picture. I want you to travel with Amlie and help guard them—and her—unless it won't fit in with your plans at all."

"I'll make it fit," Nick replied. "Intrigue fascinates me. I should have bee [illegible] I was a great Jam [illegible] Nick Carter's adv [illegible]"

"Yes indeed They're tremendously popular here. Of course such things happen more often to you Americans."

"Maybe in quantity. But I read somewhere that the most complex crimes happen in England, France and the Netherlands, in that order."

"Really?" Laansma was fascinated. "But think of Murph the Surf. Your police on every subway train. The way they rob armored cars in New England—it seems like every month."

"We can't match England, where they clean out a whole train."

"I see what you mean. Our criminals are ingenious—"

"Sure. The States gets the action, but the Old World has the brains. Anyway, I'll be glad to schedule my return to match Amlie's trip. As you say—I like diamonds and I love blondes."

After Nick had gone Laansma smoked thoughtfully, leaning back in his big leather chair, studying the Lautrec sketch on the far wall—an original. Norman Kent was an interesting type. He looked deeper than he was. No police agent would discuss crime the way he had or admit his interest in it or mention secret service. Nor would any agency Laansma had ever heard of turn loose an agent with a hundred thousand dollars to spend and a letter of ...it for more. Kent would develop into a good custom- ...d there might be a way to use him for other mat- ... He was glad Oom and his aides had failed. He ...hought of Amlie. She had probably spent the night with Kent. The idea aroused him. He had regarded her as a delightful playmate to be enjoyed cautiously. The image of that gorgeous body in another's arms excited his memories.

He went up to the fourth floor and found her in her office near the design department. When he hinted at dinner she said she had a date with Norman Kent. He hid his disappointment. Returning to his office he found Nicholas G. Groot waiting to see him. They went into Laansma's private chambers.

Groot was a small dark man with the odd ability to disappear amid three people. He was as inconspicuous as a theater usher or the co-pilot on your flight. After the

greetings Laansma asked, "Have you decided on a price for the Cullinans?"

"Have you decided what you will pay?"

They spent thirty minutes arguing to a no-decision.

Nick walked slowly into his hotel. There were many things he wanted to do Nose about among Herb Whitlock's acquaintances and haunts, trace the Yenisei Cullinans in case Amlie brought no information; discover what Manson's did with the Kelley engravings. But any wrong move might destroy his cover and role which were working well. It was frustrating—waiting watchfully for them to come to you. Or come at you.

At the desk he was handed a large, pink sealed envelope, marked—*Mr. Norman Kent, Hand Deliver. Valuable.*

He stepped into the exotic lobby and opened it. The typed message read: *I have the YCs at an attractive price. I will contact you soon Jean Batiste Van Rijn.*

Nick smiled. He entered the elevator carrying the pink envelope like a flag. They caught him at the door of his room, two well-dressed men who seemed to fill the deserted corridor.

The Old World has a lot to learn, Nick thought as he fumbled at the lock. "Damn," he said.

They were coming to him No doubt about it. Their paths at him were as true as two planes homing on an omni-range station When they were six feet away he dropped the key and drew Wilhelmina in a fraction of a second. The practiced sweep of his right hand, as fast and unexpected as the flick of a lizard's tongue, hardly disarranged his jacket or topcoat.

"Hold it right there," he snapped. He tossed the pink envelope from his left hand at their feet. "You are following that? Okay, you've found me."

"Really?" Laansma was fascinated. "But think of Murph the Surf. Your police on every subway train. The way they rob armored cars in New England—it seems like every month."

"We can't match England, where they clean out a whole train."

"I see what you mean. Our criminals are ingenious—"

"Sure. The States gets the action, but the Old World has the brains. Anyway, I'll be glad to schedule my return to match Amlie's trip. As you say—I like diamonds and I love blondes."

After Nick had gone Laansma smoked thoughtfully, leaning back in his big leather chair, studying the Lautrec sketch on the far wall—an original. Norman Kent was an interesting type. He looked deeper than he was. No police agent would discuss crime the way he had or admit his interest in it or mention secret service. Nor would any agency Laansma had ever heard of turn loose an agent with a hundred thousand dollars to spend and a letter of ·dit for more. Kent would develop into a good custom- and there might be a way to use him for other mat- He was glad Oom and his aides had failed. He thought of Amlie. She had probably spent the night with Kent. The idea aroused him. He had regarded her as a delightful playmate to be enjoyed cautiously. The image of that gorgeous body in another's arms excited his memories.

He went up to the fourth floor and found her in her office near the design department. When he hinted at dinner she said she had a date with Norman Kent. He hid his disappointment. Returning to his office he found Nicholas G. Groot waiting to see him. They went into Laansma's private chambers.

Groot was a small dark man with the odd ability to disappear amid three people. He was as inconspicuous as a theater usher or the co-pilot on your flight. After the

greetings Laansma asked, "Have you decided on a price for the Cullinans?"

"Have you decided what you will pay?"

They spent thirty minutes arguing to a no-decision.

Nick walked slowly into his hotel. There were many things he wanted to do Nose about among Herb Whitlock's acquaintances and haunts; trace the Yenisei Cullinans in case Amlie brought no information; discover what Manson's did with the Kelley engravings. But any wrong move might destroy his cover and role which were working well. It was frustrating—waiting watchfully for them to come to you. Or come at you.

At the desk he was handed a large, pink sealed envelope, marked—*Mr. Norman Kent, Hand Deliver, Valuable.*

He stepped into the exotic lobby and opened it. The typed message read: *I have the YCs at an attractive price. I will contact you soon. Jean Batiste Van Rijn.*

Nick smiled. He entered the elevator carrying the pink envelope like a flag They caught him at the door of his room, two well-dressed men who seemed to fill the deserted corridor.

The Old World has a lot to learn, Nick thought as he fumbled at the lock "Damn," he said

They were coming to him No doubt about it Their paths at him were as true as two planes homing on an omni-range station When they were six feet away he dropped the key and drew Wilhelmina in a fraction of a second. The practiced sweep of his right hand, as fast and unexpected as the flick of a lizard's tongue, hardly disarranged his jacket or topcoat.

"Hold it right there," he snapped He tossed the pink envelope from his left hand at their feet. "You are following that? Okay, you've found me"

Chapter 3

The two men froze like characters on a screen when the film is stopped. Their eyes widened at the deadly greeting of Wilhelmina's longish snout. Their hands were in sight. One carried black gloves. Nick said, "Don't move until I tell you to. Do you understand my English all right?"

After a pause to swallow the man with the gloves swered, "Ja—yes. You are making—"

"Shut up. Follow me." Nick swept up his key, unlocked e door with one quick twist and backed into the room, keeping both men in sight. "Come on."

They trailed after him. He kicked the door shut.

The one with the gloves said, "You don't understand. We have a message for you. If you'll come—"

"I got it. You put it in a pink envelope to mark me. We used that track in the U.S. a century ago. But you didn't come up in the elevator with me. How did you catch up?"

The two looked at each other. Gloves said, "Transmitter. We were waiting in another corridor on this floor. A friend in the lobby sent us word when you picked up the envelope."

"Very efficient. Your intercoms work in a building like this?"

"Up to a few hundred yards. You walk back and forth until you find a spot where the receiver functions."

"We have the same problems. Sit down. Don't take your hands out of sight."

"We don't want to sit. Mr. Van Rijn sent us to fetch [illegible]"

[illegible]

"Well, Mr. Van Rijn was—definite"

"Why didn't he ask me to call on him, or come to see me himself?"

"We don't know."

"How far away is he?"

"Fifteen minutes."

"In his office or home?"

"In a car."

Nick nodded thoughtfully He had wanted contacts, action. Wish and receive. He said, "Both of you. Lean on that wall. There." They started to protest. Wilhelmina urged as Nick's expression changed from pleasant to unsmilingly impassive. They put their hands on the wall.

One carried a Colt 32 automatic, the other was unarmed. He searched them thoroughly, right down to their shins for garter holsters. He stepped back, snicked the magazine out of the Colt and thumbed the cartridges off its top in a cascade to the floor Pinning Wilhelmina under one arm he pulled back the slide. The chamber was empty. "This is an interesting weapon. Not very popular any more. Can you get shells for it here?"

"Yes."

"Where did you buy it?"

"In Brattleboro, Vermont I was over on a visit. I find it—comfortable."

Nick snapped the magazine back into the butt, [illegible] Wilhelmina from under his arm back into her [illegible] held out the Colt. "Here "

They turned from the wall, looking surprised. [illegible] moment, gloves held out his hand for [illegible] it to him. "Put it away," Nick sa[illegible]

ijn. I don't have much time. And please—don't either of ou make any fast moves. I'm quite nervous and I move ist myself. Something might happen that we'd all be orry for."

They had a large, rather ancient but beautifully kept Mercedes, driven, Nick assumed, by the man with the transmitter. They drove toward Halfweg, turned off on the old road and into a street where a gray Jaguar was parked near the middle of the block with one man in it.

"That him?" Nick asked.

"Yes."

"Please stay in the car. I will talk to him."

He knew by the rise in tension—call it smell, a tightening of muscles, or intuition—that they didn't like it. He said, "Don't try it. I won't tell him what happened at the hotel. You tell him what you please."

They did not move when he got out and walked swiftly to the Jaguar, watching the Mercedes' driver until he was shielded by the gray car.

The man in the car looked like a naval officer on liday. He wore a blue double-breasted jacket with brass buttons and a blue yachting cap. Nick said, "Mr. Van Rijn—may I get in?"

"Please do." Nick shook a firm hand. "Excuse my—method of sending for you, Mr. Kent, but this is a delicate matter."

"I enjoyed it," Nick answered with a grin.

Van Rijn looked puzzled. "Ah—well—of course you know what I want to talk to you about. You are here t buy the Yenisei Cullinans. I have them. You know thei worth, I presume. Would you care to make an offer?"

"I certainly would," Nick said affably. "But you see-we don't know their exact value. What is your idea of figure?"

"Six million."

"Can I see them?"

"Certainly."

They sat regarding each other pleasantly. Nick wondered if he'd take them out of his pocket or the glove compartment or from under the seat. At last Nick said, "Do you have them with you?"

"The Cullinans! My heavens no. Half the police in Europe are looking for them." He laughed. "And none of them letting the others know they are! And—" He lowered his voice. "—several highly skilled criminal groups are after them."

"Really! I thought—it would all be very—secret."

"Oh no. The news is all over East Europe so you can imagine the leaks. The Russians are livid. I actually think they'd pop a bomb on Amsterdam—a small one I suppose—if they could be sure. It's almost the theft of the century, you know."

"As *you* know, Mr. Van Rijn—"

"Call me Jean—"

"Okay, Jean, call me Norman. I'm no diamond expert. For instance, and forgive this stupid question, how many carats?"

The older man's handsome face expressed astonishment. "Norman—you really don't know the diamond business. Is that why you had Phil Laansma with you when you were visiting around?"

"Of course."

"I see. You must be—a little careful of Phil."

"Thank you."

"The Cullinans have not been cut. The buyer may want to make many decisions about that. But I assure you that what you heard is correct. They are as beautiful and evidently as flawless as the original."

"Really!"

"Yes. God in his wisdom only knows why similar ones were found so far apart. That is a delightful puzzle. Or perhaps no puzzle at all if they are *not* related."

"That's true."

Van Rijn shook his head, pondering

"Amazing. Nature. Geology. Who can tell?"

"It's a mystery."

Nick thought: If you only knew what a mystery it is—to me. We could do half this talking in Mondolingue for all I *really* understand. "I bought a few stones from Phil. A wholesale experiment."

"Oh? Will you need them if you get the Cullinans?"

"Our business is expanding rapidly."

"I see. That's good. How did you know what to pay?"

"I let him set prices. We'll know in two weeks whether we do more business with Manson's—or never again."

"Clever. Norman, my reputation, I believe, is even more substantial than Laansma's. As you can check for yourself. Why not let me set a price on the Cullinans? With an agreement to renegotiate."

"There's a big difference between a little test order and six million dollars."

"You said yourself you're not a diamond man. Even if you inspect them, what will you really learn?"

"I'll know a little more than I do now about them." Nick took his jeweler's glass out of his pocket, hoping he didn't hold it too clumsily. "Can I have a look?"

Van Rijn chuckled. "You Americans. I wonder if you are a diamond expert—fooling us all. It could be." He reached into a pocket of his magnificent blue jacket. Nick stiffened. Van Rijn gave him a Wulff Bagatello cigar from a small case and lit one himself. "Very well, Norman, you shall see them. How about Friday evening? At my place in the country, near Volkel above Helmond. I'll send

is the address and there's a little map on the back. Shall I have my men drive you back to town?"

"No thanks. I'll get a trolley at the end of the street. I enjoy riding them—and your men seemed bored with my company." Nick shook hands and got out. He smiled and waved good-by to Van Rijn who nodded pleasantly as he drove off. Nick smiled and waved at the men in the Mercedes as it followed. They cut him coldly, like old-school British gentry passing a farmer who had closed his fields to the hunt.

When Nick entered the Die Port van Cleve he sniffed the aroma from the steak dishes in the big restaurant, glanced at his watch. He should pick up Amlie in forty minutes. He was hungry. The big appetites were catching. He hurried under the neat sign—*Since 1870—We Sell Beefsteaks.*

A voice behind him stopped him near the elevator. "Mr. Kent—" He turned swiftly, recognized the police detective who had taken down the statement after three men had invaded his room

"Yes?"

Nick had liked the sharp-eyed, businesslike CD man when he had met him—he hoped his opinion wasn't going to change. The man's pleasant, open, soft-featured "Dutch" face was impossible to read—and there was often iron under those bland features "Mr Kent, can you spare a moment for a glass of beer with me?"

"All right, Just one, thank you. I have a date." They went into the ancient, nose-teasing bar, with its rich smells of fine food and heavy brews. The CD man ordered schooners.

"When a policeman buys the drinks he wants something," Nick said with a grin to soften th[illegible] "Wh[illegible] can I tell you?"

He got back a smile to match his c[illegible] [illegible]isan[illegible] enough. "I imagine, Mr. Kent, you wil[illegible] [illegible]at you want me to know."

Nick let his smile go. "Oh?"

"Don't be angry. We have so many problems in a city like this. It has been a crossroads of the world for centuries. We always wonder if events fit into part of a larger pattern. I think in America you may be—rougher but simpler. You still have the oceans that shut out a lot of the world. Here we always wonder about every little possibility."

Nick tasted the beer. Excellent. "I suppose you're right."

"Consider your—robbery attempt. It would have been much simpler to burglarize your room. Or wait until you were on a lonely street if they wanted something you carry."

"I'm glad to see you chaps are careful to distinguish between robbery and burglary." Nick put out the tiny lead—deliberately.

"Not everyone knows the difference, Mr. Kent. Except lawyers—and policemen. Are you a lawyer?"

"I'm not a lawyer."

"Ahh." It was a noncommittal sound of interest. "Of course, you are a diamond buyer." He took out a small picture and showed it to Nick. "I wonder if this might be one of the men who attacked you?"

It was a file-shot of no-neck, with flat lighting which made him look like a professional wrestler seen full-face on a bad TV screen. Nick said, "Now that might be him. I can't be sure. Everything happened so fast."

The CD man put the picture away. "Would you like to tell me—off the record as the reporters say—if he was one of them?"

Nick ordered more beer and glanced at his watch. He would have to call Amlie, but this was too important to hurry. "You're spending a lot of time on a simple hotel job. You must have a big staff."

"We are just as busy as they are everywhere. But as I said—sometimes things fit into a larger pattern. You keep

trying and sometimes the bit of the puzzle goes into place. If you will answer my question, I'll tell you something you ought to know."

"Off the record?"

"Off the record"

Nick studied the man once more. Followed his intuition. "He was one."

"I thought so. He works for Philipine Laansma. The three of them have returned to his country home. Somewhat the worse for wear."

"You've got an inside man out there?"

"I cannot answer that, even off the record."

"I understand."

"Do you want to charge them?"

"Not now. What are the Yenisei Cullinans?"

"Ahh. Many people in the trade can tell you that although the papers haven't got it yet or don't believe it. Some months ago in the gold washings at the Yenisei River—that's in Soviet Siberia—three magnificent diamonds were found It was the most astonishing find ever made. Allegedly they weigh nearly one-and-a-half English pounds each. Estimated 3,100 carats Do you realize the value?"

"Approximately. Depending on quality."

"They are supposed to be as good as the find after which they are named, the Cullinan Diamond found in 1905 in the Transvaal. It was cut here in 1908. Two of the first four big stones may still be the largest, most flawless brilliants in existence. The Russians reportedly allowed a former Dutch diamond expert to evaluate them. Their security was lax Both he and the diamonds disappeared. They are supposed to be in Amsterdam."

Nick made a short, soundless whistle. "That *would* be the theft of the century. Do you have a lead on the man?"

"That is the difficulty. During the Second World War a number of Dutchmen, I am sorry to say, to[illegible]crative positions with the Hitler gang. For [illegible]

some for ideological reasons. Naturally the records on them were destroyed or confused. And trying to trace those who went to the Soviet Union or perhaps were captured and stayed there has been almost impossible. We have over twenty suspects but we have pictures and descriptions on less than half of them."

"Laansma one of them?"

"Oh no. He is too young. Mr. Laansma is a businessman. His operations have been getting complex in recent years."

"Complex enough to make a grab for the Cullinans? Or be a receiver for them?"

The CD man carefully avoided the trap. "Since the ownership of the stones may be clouded, there are many firms who might take a chance at such a prize."

"What about international complications? What will a find like this do to diamond values?"

"We are cooperating with the Russians, of course. But once the stones are cut identification may be hopeless. They may be cut too quickly and wastefully, but there will still be several fortunes in gems. In themselves the stones are not a big danger to values, and as far as we know, the Yenisei area is not a new field. If it is there'll be chaos in the markets, at least for awhile."

"I see that I must buy very carefully."

"Mr. Kent—not to contradict you—I don't think you are a real diamond buyer. Would you like to tell me who you really are? If my suspicions are correct, we could be of help to each other."

"I hope to help you all I can, and I want your help. But my name is Norman Kent and I'm a diamond buyer for the Bard Galleries in New York. You can call Bill Rohde, the owner and manager of Bard, and check for yourself. I'll pay for the call."

The CD man sighed. Nick regretted his inability to cooperate, but tactically it would never do to relax his AXE cover. The CD man might know more about Whit-

lock's death than had appeared in the records. Nick wanted to ask him about Jean Batiste Van Rijn, and if Oom Myer and his boys were up to sniping, but he could not. He finished his beer. "I've got to run. I'm late for a date now."

"Can you postpone it for a little while longer?"

"I don't want to."

"Please—here is a man you *must* meet."

Nick hardened his jaw. For the first time since he had met him the CD man showed a little muscle. There was a strong accent on the *must*.

Nick called Amlie and told her he would be late. "... I'm sorry. Lots of people want to meet Norman Kent."

"Norman—" The concern in her tone was genuine. "Be careful."

"Nothing to fear in law-abiding Amsterdam, my dear."

The CD man left them beside a chauffeur-driven Bentley. De Troija was silent as they drove swiftly out Linnaeus Straat and ten minutes later stopped before the door of a giant warehouse. Nick saw the sign *Shell* as the big metal door rose, then lowered behind the car.

The interior of the well-lighted building was so barren they made a loop and stopped beside an even larger, shinier limousine parked near the center. Nick saw stacks of cartons, neatly parked fork-lifts—and at the far end another, smaller car with a man standing beside it. He held a rifle or submachine gun—Nick could not tell which at the distance—trying to keep it unobtrusively behind his body. In an opening between cartons piled on a loading dock Nick saw another man Another was stationed near the door. They looked watchful.

Nick eased Wilhelmina with a twist of his left arm. He was getting too trustful De Troija said, "If you will get into the back of the other car, you will meet the person I mentioned."

Nick sat still for a moment. He saw the empty flag mounts on the gleaming black fenders of the other limousine He said softly, "Tell me—does the person in that car have the right to put flags in those holders?"

"Yes"

"Mr. De Troija—when I get out of *this* car I'm a helpless target for a few moments. Would you be so kind as to get out first and *take* me across."

"Certainly."

Nick's back itched. He kept very close to de Troija as the other opened the limousine's door and murmured, "Mr Norman Kent."

Nick got out of the open and into the car [illegible] and

Troija closed the door behind him. In the back seat sat woman, but Nick could only be sure she was a woman her aroma of excellent perfume. She was so swathed in ırs and veils you could not tell by looking. When she poke he felt better. It was a woman's voice, English poken with a strong Dutch accent.

"Mr. Kent. Thank you for coming. I know this is unusual but these are unusual times."

"They certainly are."

"Please don't be alarmed. This is a practical busines matter—I should say meeting."

"I was alarmed," Nick lied, "until I met you. Now feel better."

"Thank you. We understand you came to Amsterdam to make a purchase. We wish to help you."

"Everybody seems to want to help me. You have a hospitable city."

"We think so. But one cannot trust everybody."

"I know. I've made one purchase. It will be a test."

"Was it a—large transaction?"

"Oh no. Just a few thousand dollars worth of dia-ıds. From a Mr. Philipine Laansma."

"I see. Did Mr. Laansma offer you some especially arge stones?"

"Are you referring to the Yenisei Cullinans?"

"Yes."

"Since they may be stolen merchandise I don't believe I should say with whom I may have discussed them."

Behind the thick, dark veil there was a sharp excla-mation of irritation. This was not a woman you shoul anger—that sound had a purposeful snap to it. Nick imag ined it forming irrevocable phrases: *Off with his hea Right this minute. We can hold the trial later.*

He chose his words carefully. "Would you consider n position? I would not tell anyone that you and I discuss the Cullinans. It would be discourteous, to say the lea Let me just say that it has been hinted to me by m

than one person that if I were interested the Cullinans might be available."

He heard something like a short, dignified snarl. "Beware of such offers. I am the only one who can sell you the Cullinans. The others are tricking you. What the English call confidence games."

"Perhaps I don't even want them."

"Mr. Kent—we are a small community here. The purpose of your visit is quite clear. I am trying to help you."

"And make a sale?"

"Of course. We saw that you might be defrauded. I decided to caution you. In a day or two Mr. de Troija will make an appointment with you to view the diamonds."

"Can't I see them now?" Nick asked the question with bland interest, coupled with an innocent smile.

"*I think you know you cannot. Mr de Troija will call* you. Meanwhile—don't spend any money foolishly."

"Thank you"

The discussion was evidently at an end Nick said, "Well—thank you for warning me. I'm sort of new to the diamond business."

"We know. It is often wise to send a clever man who is not an expert than an expert who is not clever. Good-by for now, Mr. Kent"

Nick climbed out of the limousine and returned to his seat beside de Troija. The car with the woman rolled silently to the metal door which arose in greeting—and vanished into the spring dusk There was a cover over the license plate. The door stayed up but de Troija's driver [illegible] "I'm late."

[illegible] They were giving the [illegible]

"Yes"

"How shall we identify her when you call me?"

"Use any name or code you wish."

"Madam J?"

"Very well."

Nick wondered where de Troija received all those wounds. He was the type who might have been anything from a fighter pilot to an infantry officer. The man had a certain simple determination about him; you concluded that he would "do his duty" as he saw it under any circumstances. Like the British officers General Patton admired: "If it's duty they'll charge hell with a riding crop."

Fifteen minutes later the Mercedes stopped at the Die Port van Cleve. De Troija said, "I'll telephone you. Thank you for coming, Mr. Kent."

Nick saw the man approach him in the lobby and turned slightly, alert and balanced. A hundred men can pass you and you don't change course, but if your senses are honed to a sensitive edge, your eyes extra keen and rarely relaxed, a man coming *to* you registers. Some of us, Hawk once said, have built-in radar, like the bat.

The man was ordinary. He was oldish, well but not nicely dressed, on the small side, with a gray mustache and an uneven gait that hinted at arthritic or other trouble in his joints. He was uninteresting—because he wanted to be. He wore shell-rimmed glasses with the lenses slightly tinted.

The glasses prevented Nick from identifying him for a moment. Then he said, "Good evening, Mr. Kent. Shall we take that stroll? It's lovely along the moat."

Nick grinned. David Hawk! "I'd enjoy that," he answered.

He meant it. It would be a relief to discuss the puzzling events of the last two days, and although he sometimes pretended otherwise, he always enjoyed Hawk's company. The older man was ruthless when his responsibilities required it, but when you saw beneath that surface there was a gentle compassion—an odd sympathy for the follies

The key question is, who really has them? Does it connec with our espionage leaks and Whitlock's death?"

"It may. Perhaps not. Let's say Manson's became an intelligence transmission line because of the continuous flow of couriers between diamond centers. The Cullinans came to Amsterdam bcause there are diamonds and because Manson's transmission belt is here. The thief knows that much." Hawk pointed at a cluster of floodlit flowers as if they were discussing them. Nick thought he handled his cane like an épée. "They may muddy the waters enough to help us with such a counterespionage problem. According to his reports Herb Whitlock knew Laansma quite well but he never met Van Rijn and he knew nothing about the Cullinans."

"There's a bare possibility Herb heard about them but didn't connect it up. He would have—if he lived." Hawk put his cane on the walk with a short stabbing motion. "We'll find out. Your CD man may have held back a piece of data which we have. His Dutch turncoat called himself a German in the Soviet Union. Name of Hans Geiser. Short, small build, about fifty-five years old. Light lond hair and he wore a beard in Siberia. Gray-blond."

"Perhaps the Russians didn't pass on the description to the Dutch."

"Very possible. Even the gigantic theft isn't worth re vealing what Geiser has been up to since 1945, in thei opinion, or the CD man is withholding it from you, whic would be logical."

"I'll watch for Geiser."

"Look for a small dark beardless man. It would be predictable switch for a methodical type. That's about we know about Geiser. Diamond expert. Long-ra planner. No loyalties except to himself."

Nick thought for an instant. "None of the men bumped into so far—or those that have tried to bu me—fit him."

"A poor pun, Nicholas. I thir the only lethal atte

was the bullet at Schiphol. Probably by Laansma's men and meant for Amlie because it is suspected that she has discovered she is a transmission courier in an espionage operation and you were perhaps a CIA agent or FBI boy."

"And they've changed their minds about eliminating her?"

"Yes. Faulty judgment. The curse of the thieving class. We know that data is being dropped at Kelley's Color Engraving Studios in New York. A business owned by Manson's. It shows up over here. They thought she discovered something at Kelley's. The attempt on her failed. Then she delivered the latest batch of engravings in good shape. She acts normally. You turn out to be a diamond buyer who checks out okay and has a lot of lovely U.S. dollars. Everyone jumps to the conclusion that you don't fit the role of an ordinary diamond buyer. Of course not, because you're after the Cullinans. You may be legitimate, you may be a Mafia spreader, but there's no need to fear you. Faulty judgment again."

Nick recalled Amlie's nervousness on the plane. "I'm overtired," had been a thin excuse. And Hawk had put the pieces of data tentatively together without even knowing that!

Nick said, "She was nervous as a cat on the plane. Kept that art case with her as if it were chained to her wrist. Both Laansma and she seemed relieved when she passed it over to him personally. Perhaps they were, although for different reasons."

"How interesting. We cannot be sure, and we must assume Laansma does not know, whether she has discovered what Manson's is up to or not. I'll leave that aspect to you."

They sauntered on. Street lights came on. It was an Amsterdam spring evening—not cool, not warm; the air moist with fragrance, pleasant rather than humid. Carefully Hawk recapped several points, probing Nick's or-

The key question is, who really has them? Does it connect with our espionage leaks and Whitlock's death?"

"It may. Perhaps not. Let's say Manson's became an intelligence transmission line because of the continuous flow of couriers between diamond centers. The Cullinans came to Amsterdam beause there are diamonds and because Manson's transmission belt is here. The thief knows that much." Hawk pointed at a cluster of floodlit flowers as if they were discussing them. Nick thought he handled his cane like an épée. "They may muddy the waters enough to help us with such a counterespionage problem According to his reports Herb Whitlock knew Laansma quite well but he never met Van Rijn and he knew nothing about the Cullinans."

"There's a bare possibility Herb heard about them but didn't connect it up. He would have—if he lived." Hawk put his cane on the walk with a short stabbing motion "We'll find out. Your CD man may have held back a piece of data which we have. His Dutch turncoat called himself a German in the Soviet Union. Name of Hans Geiser. Short, small build, about fifty-five years old. Light lond hair and he wore a beard in Siberia. Gray-blond."

"Perhaps the Russians didn't pass on the description to the Dutch."

"Very possible. Even the gigantic theft isn't worth revealing what Geiser has been up to since 1945, in their opinion, or the CD man is withholding it from you, which would be logical."

"I'll watch for Geiser."

"Look for a small dark beardless man. It would be a predictable switch for a methodical type. That's about all we know about Geiser. Diamond expert. Long-range planner. No loyalties except to himself."

Nick thought for an instant. "None of the men I've bumped into so far—or those that have tried to bump me—fit him."

"A poor pun, Nicholas. I think the only lethal attemp

was the bullet at Schiphol. Probably by Laansma's men and meant for Amlie because it is suspected that she has discovered she is a transmission courier in an espionage operation and you were perhaps a CIA agent or FBI boy."

"And they've changed their minds about eliminating her?"

"Yes. Faulty judgment. The curse of the thieving class. We know that data is being dropped at Kelley's Color Engraving Studios in New York. A business owned by Manson's. It shows up over here. They thought she discovered something at Kelley's. The attempt on her failed. Then she delivered the latest batch of engravings in good shape. She acts normally You turn out to be a diamond buyer who checks out okay and has a lot of lovely U S. dollars. Everyone jumps to the conclusion that you don't fit the role of an ordinary diamond buyer Of course not, because you're after the Cullinans. You may be legitimate [illegible]
fear [illegible]

Ni[illegible]
overtired," had been a thin excuse. And Hawk had put the pieces of data tentatively together without even knowing that!

Nick said, "She was nervous as a cat on the plane Kept that art case with her as if it were chained to her wrist. Both Laansma and she seemed relieved when she passed it over to him personally. Perhaps they were, although for different reasons."

"How interesting. We cannot be sure, and we must assume Laansma does not know, whether she has discovered what Manson's is up to or not. I'll leave that aspect to you."

They sauntered on. Street lights came on. It was an Amsterdam spring evening—not cool, not warm, the air moist with fragrance, pleasant rather than humid. Carefully Hawk recapped several points, probing Nick's opinion

with subtle questions. At last the older man did an about-face on Prins Hendrick Kade and Nick knew that official business was completed. Hawk said, "Let us have one quick glass of good beer, Nicholas. To your success."

They entered a bar, all ancient architecture and fine old woods, which looked as if it might be the one in which Henry Hudson had his last glass before setting sail in *de Halve Maen* to discover an Indian island called Manhatta. Over amber schooners with creamy, full-bodied heads on the brew Nick said as much.

"Yes," Hawk agreed somewhat sadly. "They called them explorers. But never forget that most of them were on the make. Two words will answer most of your questions about them. And about men like Laansma and Van Rijn and women like that one behind the veil. When you've got a tough puzzle, put it to the test."

Nick drank beer and waited. Hawk could be infuriating at times. Hawk sniffed the aroma of his big glass. "Hmm. That's beer. Not soda water with alcohol and beer flavoring added."

"What are the two words?" Nick asked.

Hawk slowly drank the last of his beer, put down the schooner with a sigh and picked up his cane. "Who gains?" he murmured.

As Nick relaxed in the Vauxhall—Amlie drove well, there were few women drivers with whom he did not sit up straight and worry—he apologized again. "Business, darling. Damn nuisance. To make up for it—how about D'Vijff Vlieghen for dinner?"

"The *Five Flies*?" She chuckled. "You read *Holiday*. But it's for tourists."

"You pick another place. Surprise me."

"All right."

He was glad he asked. They dined at the 't Swarte Schaep, by candlelight beside a stained glass casement window, on the third floor of a picturesque Seventeenth

Century building. The stairway bannisters were oiled rope, copper pans adorned the burnished wood walls. You expected Rembrandt to saunter in with a long pipe and floppy hat, one hand patting his girl's buxom bottom. The drinks were perfect, the food magnificent, the atmosphere a reminder that time is valuable and effortless

Over coffee and brandy Nick said, "Thanks for bringing me here. This background reminds you that maybe birth and death are important but all between is a game."

"It does seem timeless." She put her fingertips on his, across the table. "It's nice to be with you Norman. I feel—secure, even after the things that have happened. All my life I've been really on my own My family was correct and affectionate in their way but I never actually felt close to them. Perhaps that's why I've developed such a warm feeling for The Netherlands And—Manson's and Phil—"

She stopped short and Nick thought she might cry. Women! Wonderful when you had them moving in one direction, but when you hit crossroads and forks—look out! They navigated by guess He frowned. You had to admit that some of the guesses were good

He stroked her polished nails. "Did you check on the Cullinans?"

"Yes." She told him about the Transvaal Cullinan. "Phil said there are diamonds called the Yenisei Cullinans. Probably for sale."

"That's right. You may hear more about them. The story is they were stolen from the Soviet Union and are in Amsterdam."

"And they are what you are really after?"

Nick sighed. It was her way of explaining the mysteries that bothered her about "Norman Kent." "No, dear. I don't think I'm interested in stolen goods. But I'll take a look if they're offered."

The pretty blue eyes were pinched with a blend of f: and uncertainty; the narrowing for calculation which i-

opposite of the widening for unworried thinking. "You puzzle me, Norman. One minute I'm convinced you're a businessman—smart or smarter as the case may be. Then I wonder if you're an insurance company investigator. Or with Interpol. Are you? Darling—tell me the truth."

"Honest and true, sweet. No." She was a weak cross-examiner. She should have asked if he was with *any* secret organization. They always made him sweat a little when he was forced to lie, although he was good at it, and hated it.

"Did they find out any more about the men who attacked you in your hotel?"

"No."

She thought of Oom Myer, a frightening man. Why would Phil have anything to do with a creature like that? The thread of fear tightened along her spine. The airport bullet—Oom?—for her? Could it have been ordered by Phil? Oh no! Not Phil. Not Manson's. But there were the engravings from Kelley's; if she had not discovered them she would face Phil with her questions, but now the little world she had attached herself to was quaking and she didn't know where to turn. "I never thought of Amsterdam as violent, Norman. I'll be glad to get back to New York, even if there I'm afraid to walk the street near my apartment at night. We've had three muggings within two blocks."

He felt her unease and was sorry for her. A little pattern of status quo was harder for women to create than men, and they treasured it. Clung to it. She was recasting her anchors at him, like a sea creature groping for a coral haven as a squall hits. When she asked *are you true?*—she meant, *will you betray me, too?*

Nick knew that if their relationship was not jarred from its present course, he would eventually create the power to force her to move the way he wished. He would have that power when some of her anchors were transferred from Lemmon-Manson's to himself. He would split her alle-

glance and then ask, "Darling, can I really trust Phil with an order that will ruin me if he cheats?"

Perch her on that knife blade of divided loyalty, then watch her reaction.

Nick drove and she directed him out Haarlemmer Weg, cuddling close against him as they cruised through the mild, quiet night. Nick said softly, "I felt a little jealous today."

"Why?"

"Thinking of you with Phil. I know you admire him. And I saw the way he looks at you. That's a nice big couch he has in his office. I—imagined things. Even if you didn't want to—the big boss and all that."

"Oh, Norman—" She rubbed his leg, inside the knee, and he was surprised at the warmth she could create in him. "It's not like that. We never—not in the office. I told you. Just a few times at parties. You're not so old-fashioned as to resent *that*."

"No. But you're beautiful enough to make a bronze statue try something new."

"If it will make you feel better—Constant Draijer is always in and out. The office doors at Manson's are never locked. And, sweetie—if you want to try no cheating for awhile—I'm with you. I like you, Norman."

He hugged her with the arm that encircled her "That's not a bad idea I've had a deep feeling about you, Amlie, since the instant we met on the plane Then last night it was so perfect. It's an unusual, strong emotion. As if your mind or your being was developing a link to mine"

"I feel it too, Norman," she whispered. "Usually I don't worry about seeing a man one way or the other. When you called and said you'd be late I felt empty [illegible] to read and couldn't. I had to keep busy. Know wh[illegible]? Washed a set of dishes. You'd have died to [illegible] Dressed for dinner with a big apron on and rubb[illegible] and washing dishes. To keep from thinking. A[illegible] wonder if you might not come at all."

"I think I understand." He stifled a yawn. "Bedtime. You're invited."

"I accept."

When she was in the bathroom with the water running he placed a quick telephone call. A softly accented woman's voice answered and he said, "Hello, Mata. I cannot talk long. There are some details about Salam's paintings I'd like to discuss. Hans Nordenboss sends his regards. Will you be home at ten in the morning?"

He heard a muffled gasp. There was a pause. "Yes."

"Can you help me for the day? I need a guide. It will be profitable."

"Yes." He admired her recovery and thriftiness with words. The water in the bathroom was turned off.

He said, "Okay, John. See you," and hung up.

Amlie came out carrying the last of her clothes, placed them neatly on a chair and asked, "Little nightcap? A—toast?"

"Great idea."

Nick caught his breath. Every time he saw that gorgeous body it did things to the hairs on the back of his neck. In the soft lights she glowed like a model set up with back lights for a color shot. Her tan was not nearly as dark as his own, but no suit marks left white hands on her mocha curves. She handed him his glass with a smile which had a new, shy warmth. "To—?"

"Us, of course." He gave her a kiss to go with it. "The Yankee traders."

She walked slowly to the bed and put her drink on the bedside table. Nick watched appreciatively. She climbed onto the white sheet in the angle of the turned-down covers and pulled her knees up under her chin, watching her toes for a moment and wiggling them. "Norman, we may be Yankee traders but we've got to be careful. I know you're shrewd and you know a good deal about diamonds but there's always the chance of getting stuck. The smart way to do it is to place small orders so that you

can check the selections at the other end before you are committed for more."

Nick tumbled down beside her. "That makes sense, baby. I sort of planned to do it that way." He thought, *The transfer is working. Balancing on the knife blade will be next.* She was warning him against Laansma and Manson's without putting it in exact words.

She turned to him, all soft and sweet and powdery and surprising him with her power to trigger his own reactions. Caution, he warned himself. Yet the genuineness of his response eased his sense of guilt. The sea creature floated, groping with her soft tentacles for security and a strong base. She was not mistaken in judging him an immovable reef in a rising sea. He would not willingly shed her hold and let her flounder or perish. In the end that decision would depend on her

She kissed the lobe of his ear and his neck and like a bride surprising her new husband revealed new arts to pleasure him—slowly, as if to say, *I've heard about this and I've secretly dreamed of trying it but this is the first time.* Healthy animal with a new playmate—he reacted without reserve and although he knew he could feign his part if necessary he was moved to discover his senses responding honestly and fully to her tiny dramas. You could get used to this Addicted was a better thought. He took a deep breath and curled and uncurled his toes, watching the patterns of night beyond the windows and reminding himself that it would have been a good idea to draw the shades He stroked the golden wheat-fluff of hair and she paused and smiled at him and said, "Isn't it nice?"

"Perfect."

"I mean being here with the whole night ahead. No hurry. The world pushed back It's as if we found a chunk of time."

"You know how to spend it."

"No more than you. I mean if you

"I think I understand." He stifled a yawn. "Bedtime. You're invited."

"I accept."

When she was in the bathroom with the water running he placed a quick telephone call. A softly accented woman's voice answered and he said, "Hello, Mata. I cannot talk long. There are some details about Salam's paintings I'd like to discuss. Hans Nordenboss sends his regards. Will you be home at ten in the morning?"

He heard a muffled gasp. There was a pause. "Yes."

"Can you help me for the day? I need a guide. It will be profitable."

"Yes." He admired her recovery and thriftiness with words. The water in the bathroom was turned off.

He said, "Okay, John. See you," and hung up.

Amlie came out carrying the last of her clothes, placed them neatly on a chair and asked, "Little nightcap? A—toast?"

"Great idea."

Nick caught his breath. Every time he saw that gorgeous body it did things to the hairs on the back of his neck. In the soft lights she glowed like a model set up with back lights for a color shot. Her tan was not nearly as dark as his own, but no suit marks left white hands on her mocha curves. She handed him his glass with a smile which had a new, shy warmth. "To—?"

"Us, of course." He gave her a kiss to go with it. "The Yankee traders."

She walked slowly to the bed and put her drink on the bedside table. Nick watched appreciatively. She climbed onto the white sheet in the angle of the turned-down covers and pulled her knees up under her chin, watching her toes for a moment and wiggling them. "Norman, we may be Yankee traders but we've got to be careful. I know you're shrewd and you know a good deal about diamonds but there's always the chance of getting stuck. The smart way to do it is to place small orders so that you

wouldn't be the same. No point. That's the catch to having all the time in the world I guess. Say, that's not a bad hypothesis. Time is only as important as its content. How about—time should be measured by its content?"

He tickled her—very lightly—and watched her try to contain her laughter and then admired her excitement as it exploded. "You're on the track of something, Miss Einstein. Now—" He explored her flesh with his lips, kiss-caresses that brought sighs from her, rich sounds of relaxation, pleasured hums. "—I'm going to give *this* time something to remember."

Using the tips of her fingers very cleverly she made him start as she whispered, "I'm going to help."

Chapter 5

The name on the apartment door in neat lettering on black plaque read Michel Eduard Oom Myer. If Amlie [illegible] Laansma or Constant Drayer, or anyone who knew My[illegible] er's income and tastes visited it they would have been surprised—and in the case of Laansma, he would have investigated matters further.

The apartment was on the third floor of one of the older buildings overlooking the Naarden road, a sturdy, timeless structure which, with minute Dutch care and maintenance, promised to never change or grow old. Years ago a building materials dealer with three children had arranged to lease the small adjacent apartment and had knocked out the walls and combined the suites. Even with his connections the permits had taken [illegible] months. In The Netherlands, real estate transactions [illegible] in ponderous channels. But once completed, the [illegible] tion had eight rooms and a long balcony.

Three years ago the man sold his last [illegible] several other properties and went to [illegible] man who showed up to take over the lease [illegible] a new one, with 22,000 guilders [illegible] Mike Myer.

He was a quiet tenant, [illegible] gradually became "that [illegible] who has a lot of [illegible]

women, although there were a few, but other substantial-looking men like Myer himself. He must be a busy and prosperous man.

Myer's prosperity came from these men, especially Nicholas G. Groot, who had appeared five years ago, told Mike to watch for a nice big apartment, and vanished for six months at a time. Recently Mike had learned that he was "a diamond man for the Russians," which was all Groot would say. It was enough. When Groot appeared suddenly and virtually vanished into the apartment, Mike knew. "You've got 'em," was all he had to say.

"I've got 'em. You get a piece. Watch Laansma and say nothing."

Groot made his contacts with Laansma and other prospects via *poste restante*. The Cullinans were hidden in a gutted camera in a nondescript case in Groot's luggage. Mike had made a quick hunt for them on three occasions, but he was not too disappointed when he did not find them. Better to let another handle a package of explosives long as you take a small profit.

he had been wrong, although he regretted not the means, only the lack of success. Hasbrouck merely shifted his needs from one symbol to another. He was absolutely loyal to Groot.

When Groot told him about the Cullinans Hasbrouck had smiled and said, "I knew someday you would succeed at something big. Will we make a lot?"

"Two fortunes, perhaps. One for each of us." Hasbrouck was the only person in the world, outside himself, for whom Groot had any feeling at all.

Now he placed the two letters carefully one on the other. "Henry, the fish bite Van Rijn wants a meeting Friday night Laansma on Saturday"

"At their places?"

"In the country."

"Dangerous."

"Yes, but necessary"

"So we will go?"

"We must Wary and armed. Cautious. Mike will protect us with inside information against Laansma's tricks. Philipine has him out sometimes trying to trail me at the post office! He gives me a wink and we have a grin together as we pass." They chuckled. "But Van Rijn may be another matter. What do you think of him?"

"I was surprised when he offered to buy."

"A good point, Henry. Van Rijn was vouched for by The Three, yet—"

Groot poured more coffee, his expression thoughtful. Hasbrouck said, "The Three cannot be often wrong and survive."

"True. They are the biggest fences in the world. But why did they not show more interest themselves? They said, 'Too hot. You need a big channel to sell off to. Like your own diamond house.' Yet—they handle big quantities of stolen diamonds from all over the world. Cut and uncut."

"We must be very careful."

We will be, Henry. You brought the dummy Cul-
ns?"

Locked in the secret place. And the car is locked."

'With the guns?"

'Yes."

"Meet me here at one. We will go. Two old men
siting crocodiles."

"We need glasses for long-range," Hasbrouck replied
avely. "But we are still very good shots."

Groot laughed. Henry was a dullard compared to him-
elf—he had been sure of it since the day long ago when
e had left for Germany and Henry had declined to
ccompany him. But Henry was trustworthy, a dependa-
ole soldier of whom you must not ask too much. Henry
had never asked about Groot's special work for Laansma,
and there was no point in telling him about the courier
service to Moscow. Groot carried the merchandise—as
Laansma called the stolen data—to his connections. Some
of it was valuable, some worthless. It sold for more, or for
less, but in the long run it provided a nice income. There
would be no more of that—a risky business if you kept it
too long.

Laansma would have no trouble finding another couri-
er-agent. If he went at it right the Russians would provide
one. But it was now none of his, Groot-Geiser's, concern.
He had just one swamp to cross, disposing of the Cul-
linans while the reptiles fought each other for the privilege
of eating *him*. Groot's hard, thin, colorless lips firmed. Let
those animals underestimate a man.

After Amlic departed, all bright and bouncy as if
Nick's company erased her worries, Nick prepared for a
trip out of town. He packed carefully, checking his special
equipment.

He swiftly assembled the pistol from parts of his por-
table typewriter which could not write. The platen made a
fine, mid-range barrel over nine inches long. The maga

zine held five cartridges of the same 9mm caliber as Wilhelmina. It functioned He stripped it and rebuilt the "typewriter," and packed it in its case. Stuart—AXE's genius with special devices—was especially proud of it. Nick did not mind the extra weight when traveling If you needed it, *you'd need it badly.*

Nick inspected the three candy bars and large hairbrush which were molded of explosive *plastique.* The firing caps were capsules in a medicine bottle, complete with date and prescription and the advice—*Take one every four hours.* The fuses were pipe cleaners in his pipe case, the six that were a half-inch shorter than the authentic ones.

His luggage contained an unusual number of ballpoint pens, distributed in half-dozen lots between his writing case, dispatch case, pockets and two-suiter Some of them were picric acid flame igniters with ten-minute timers, others were explosive and the blue ones were fragmentation grenades.

When he was ready to go—leaving only a few items in the room—he called Van Rijn and Laansma and confirmed his dates with them at their country estates. Then he reached Amlie and sensed her disappointment when he said, "Sugar sweet—I won't be able to see you this evening. Are you going out to Laansma's for the weekend?"

"I was waiting for you to bring it up. I'm always invited—"

"I'm liable to be tied up for awhile Let's meet there Saturday."

"All right . . " She spoke slowly and with concern. He knew she was wondering where he would be, what he would be doing, conjecturing, worrying He felt sorry for her for a moment, then closed his emotions She had taken chips in the game, knowing its odorous and brutal rules

Driving a rented Volvo 144, *using a detailed map of* the city and its suburbs, he found the address near Zaandam, on the edge of a toy town painted bright colors and

kept spotless and in perfect repair. You wouldn't want it any other way, he thought as he bought a cluster of beautiful flowers at a corner shop, but the dolls ought to learn to think as they scrub.

Mata opened the door the instant he knocked, said, "Darling," and when he held out his arms, crushed the flowers between them. Kissing and fondling took a long time, but at last she put the flowers in a vase, then dabbed at her eyes.

Nick said, "I'm not that bad news. Stop crying."

"It's been so long. I'm lonely. You remind me of Jakarta."*

"The happier times I hope."

"Of course. I know you did what you had to do."

"I'm on a similar job here. My name is Norman Kent. The man before me was named Herbert Whitlock. Ever hear of him?"

"Yes." Mata walked slowly to a small self-contained bar, lifted its cover. "They drink too much here, but I feel the need. A small *oude genever* with some coffee?"

"Love it."

She brought the drinks and sat beside him on a couch with a crisp, flowered cover. "So—Norman Kent. I would not have connected you with Herb Whitlock, although now I see why he was in so many places, attended so many parties and affairs. I should have guessed."

"Perhaps not. We come in all sizes and shapes. Look—" He took a map from his pocket and showed her the Volkel area. "Do you know this country?"

"Yes. Wait a moment—I have detailed maps."

She went into another room and Nick surveyed the apartment. About four good-sized rooms. Very expensive. Mata had landed on her feet—or you might make a bad joke, her back. Mata had been one of the cleverest, most influential amateur "intelligence" agents in Indonesia until

* See the Nick Carter book—*Jakarta.*

Nick expelled her. It had been a deal without rancor—he might have been much more severe.

Mata returned and spread out a detail map. "There. Volk-l."

"Here's an address. It's Jean Batiste Van Rijn's country place. Can you place it?"

She studied the intricate lines and shadings "Here. It must be a farm. Fields and forests. They're rare and expensive in this country."

"I asked you if you could spend a day with me. Suppose it takes longer—okay?"

She turned to him. She wore a simple wrap which resembled a far-East wraparound in design and pattern It gave her a willowy, supple look, and set off attractively the rounded arcs of her breasts and rump. Mata was small and dark, in direct contrast to Amlie, and she was as utterly attractive in her different way. Her smile was quick, her sense of humor broad. In one way she was smarter than Amlie. She had seen more, lived through trying times She did not resent life because of it—she thought it absurd. Her dark eyes mocked him as she raised red lips and put her small hands on each side of his stomach. "I knew you would come back to me, *darling* What took you so long?"

After two more gins and several warm embraces for old time's sake they left, Nick carrying Mata's quickly packed overnight case. It had taken her four minutes to get ready. He wondered if she still kept herself ready to go over the rear wall at the wrong knock.

As they rolled along International Route 9 Nick said, "I figure under a hundred miles Do you know the way?"

"Yes. We'll turn west at Bois Le Duc and I'll inquire at the post offices or police stations in Uden or Zeeland *I* assume you're still on the side *of right*? Otherwise—we'll find a café—."

"Van Rijn is a solid citizen *We look like responsible* guests. Use the post office. I have an appointment with

him this evening but I want to look the place over carefully. What do you know about him?"

"Not much. I did one job for his company's ad agency and met him two or three times at parties. Like all business communities, you get the feeling that the great city of Amsterdam is a small town once you start to move around. The same propositions."

"From him?"

"No, no. I was just thinking." She sighed. "If you talk politely and keep your ears open you get the feel of all of them. Not speaking literally. He is supposed to be big time. Excellent connections. And loyal—I mean, if he has any leanings toward international crime like those men we—knew in Jakarta—I think I would have heard of it."

"In other words he's not mixed up in espionage."

"Yes." She replied softly, as if the word were distasteful. "I don't suppose he's any more honest than any other wheeler-dealer, but his—how do you put it?—his skirts are clean?"

"Right. How about Philipine Laansma of Manson's?"

"Ah! I don't know him but I have heard—he will do business in the dark."

They rode for awhile in silence. And you, Nick wondered, you, Mata?—do you no longer do business in the dark? He peeked at her. The clean-cut, eye-catching Eurasian profile was outlined against a wide green field.

He said, "You're as beautiful as ever, Mata. How are things going? Financially—romantically?"

"Thanks. Is that why you left me in Singapore? Because I'm so beautiful?"

"I deserve that. You know my job. Shall I take you back to Amsterdam?"

She sighed. "No, my love—I'm happy to see you again. Except that I cannot, for a few hours, laugh quite as much as we used to. I'm working. They have heard of me in Europe. My sample book is impressive. I make out well."

"By the looks of that apartment—very well."

"It cost me a horrible amount. But I had to have a decent one Romantically? Nothing serious. Some very dear friends. Nice men. I cannot any longer stand the other kind" She leaned against him and added softly, "Since I knew you—"

Nick put his arm around her and felt a little bit like a heel.

They enjoyed a magnificent lunch—a bountiful *Hollandsche Koffietafel*—at a lovely restaurant overlooking the blue *Maas*, where the proprietor banked both sides of the entrance with five yards of assorted, multi-hued flowers. The effect was so striking Nick thought Mata was taking him into a florist's instead of a restaurant.

Less than an hour later they drove slowly along a rural road lined with the typical new-toy farms, following directions Mata had obtained at a post office. They passed scrubbed children wearing *klompen*—wooden shoes. Across a field Nick watched a sailboat that appeared to be sailing in a meadow with cows, so hidden was the little canal on which it floated. They passed what was clearly a stable and Nick grunted. "I don't believe it."

"What?"

"I'm sure that was a stable. There was a horse in a stall looking out at me past *lace curtains*."

Mata laughed. "It's not *verstandsverbijstering*. Sometimes you do see stables with curtains."

"Okay, but what's that word?"

"It means madness." She sat up and pointed ahead. "There! That's the side road on the detail map. Unless there are smaller roads not shown it should cross Van Rijn's place at the back, or close to it. He must come from an old family—to have this many acres in the Netherlands. It is not like Java."

A high, wire-topped fence came out of a neat forest, made a right angle to parallel the road It was set well back. Nick said, "That may mark his property."

"Perhaps."

The road was barely wide enough for two cars, and here and there were turnouts, usually with small clumps of trees, their neat shapes showing that they were pruned and cared for. There were no branches on the ground, not a scrap of litter, even the grass was neat. From the forest beyond the fence a dirt and gravel path appeared and made a gentle turn to follow the road, then led away from them again to disappear in the trees. Nick pulled into one of the turnouts. "That looked like a bridle path. Van Rijn said he has horses."

"There is no gate here. We passed one but it had a big lock on it. Why not look further?"

"In a moment. Please—the map."

He studied the topographical drawing. "Sure—it is shown as an unmarked trail, and it goes all the way to the road on the other side of the forest." He drove on slowly.

"Don't you ever just drive in a main entrance? I remember in Indonesia—you usually popped up."

"Still at it, Mata, my sweet. There—" He saw faint tire tracks in the grass leading to a space between the fence nd trees. He followed them and parked, partly concealed om the road. In the U.S.A. it would be called a lover's lane, except that here there was no litter. "I'm going to take a short look around. I like to know something about a place before I pay a visit."

She uptilted her face to him, and he thought: In her way she's prettier than Amlie—it's the dark, little-girl, Eurasian look. He kissed her slowly and thoroughly and handed her the keys. "Keep these."

"And if you don't come back?"

"Go home and cable Hans Nordenboss the whole story. But I'll be back."

As he climbed onto the roof of the car he told himself, I always have. But the day will come when I won't. Mata is so practical. He made a powerful, standing broad jump that rocked the car on its springs, cleared the fence, rolled over once in a side-somersault and bounced to his feet and

grinned at Mata, making a little acrobat's bow. Then he ran into the trees and vanished from her sight.

A generous slice of golden sunlight came through the trees and crossed her cheeks. She basked in it—smoking, thinking, remembering. In Jakarta she had not accompanied "Norman Kent"—he was known by another name then—but he was the same powerful, fascinating, kind, unswervable, soft-hard and hard-hard man when he trailed the mysterious Judas. He had searched without her for the Q-ship headquarters of Judas and Heinrich Muller, and when he found it, a Chinese junk disguised as a Portugese prau, another Indonesian girl was near him.

Mata sighed. To an objective observer her brown Eurasian beauty was more captivating in thoughtful serenity than when she was animated or smiling. She had the timeless loveliness of the girls the Chinese artists paint and carve—passion highlighted and stopped-in-place. That younger girl in Indonesia, Mata thought, had been beautiful. As charming as Mata herself, to be fair—but beyond that, between them there was the world's difference. Mata knew what a man wanted between dawn and dusk and darkness and light, the younger woman was just learning life. No wonder that pretty adolescent had worshiped him. "Norman Kent" was the ideal man to awaken any girl.

Mata studied the forest into which Norman had disappeared. She tried to remember just what she had heard about Jean Batiste Van Rijn She had described him—"Excellent connections Loyal." She sat up straight. Had she misled him? Perhaps she had not been explicit, she did not *know* Van Rijn. She had overlooked such a situation once . . .

She got out of the car, stamped on her cigarette and took off her yellow leather shoes. They were of beautifully cured hide, with medium heels, deceptively sturdy. One had a hollow heel, the crevice now empty. She climbed on top of the Volvo, braced herself and [illegible] the air across the fence. Her leap didn't cover [illegible]

as Nick's but it was more graceful. She landed on legs which cushioned the shock with a deep knee bend as smoothly as the shock absorbers on a light plane. She put on her shoes and headed for the trees.

Nick walked along the edge of the bridle trail for several hundred yards, following its gentle curve through the forest. He walked on the thick, spring-green tightly woven grass in order not to leave footprints on the horse trail which was as smooth and even as a raked football field, except for the track of one set of hooves which had passed by at a steady trot. There were indentations on the edges of the gravel path which had been made by tires. Nick decided that was the answer to the immaculate condition of the trail. They had a landscaping machine of some sort which probably clipped the edge-grass and raked and smoothed the gravel at the same time.

He reached a long tangent where the bridle path cut straight through the trees and the tracks of the unknown horseman changed to a canter. Nick decided not to be caught in the middle of that open stretch, and went into the woods and moved parallel to the trail. You couldn't have done it in Southern Pines, or even near the trails in Pocantico Hills which Rockefeller tries to keep neat. Here Nick was able to stroll through the trees as if he were walking in a park. Low branches were pruned to head level, there was almost no deadfall or even leaves on the ground, and the trees themselves were so well-spaced that they grew sturdily with wide-spread tops because each received ample sun.

He came to a large oval of tight growth, composed of barbed and impenetrable bushes that looked like barber and wild roses. The vicious spines, green and red be and multi-color flowers were deceptive. There were tunnels into the oval and Nick decided it was a ref game. A rabbit's resort. He went on, humming about the man who jumped into the bramble bush

The bridle path crossed a creek on a rus

bridge that looked as if it were coated weekly with linseed oil. The wood glowed. The creek's banks were as manicured as the trees and a deep pool with rocks at its edge seemed to guarantee good fishing. Nick jumped it, went up a long rise still paralleling the horse path, and came to the top of a knoll where the trees had been removed like a circle of missing hair on the head of a man going bald.

The trees had been cut away to permit a view. A path or sidetrack came to the top of the hillock from the bridle path, and on the crest there was a hitch-rail, two long benches and a mounting block, made out of the same rich wood as the bridge. Nick took one quick look and then faded off to the side to stay off the skyline

The panorama was lovely It belonged on a tourist postcard captioned *Dutch Landscape* The forest stretched away for about a thousand yards, and even the tops of the trees looked pruned-to-the-round. Beyond were neat sections of planted fields. Nick studied them through his small telescope, another of Stuart's devices, all fine lenses and very little brass case The fields were an odd assortment of grains, flowers and vegetables A man worked one with a small, bright yellow tractor, and two women were bent low working in another.

Beyond the fields was a beautiful big house with large outbuildings that included a garage, stable and a long group of greenhouses that sparkled in the sun. Nick lowered his glass suddenly and sniffed—cigar smoke! He went back into the trees and circled the knoll, prowling from tree to tree On the opposite side of the hill he found a new, blue Daf sedan hidden in the trees. Its tracks showed how it had corkscrewed through the roadless forest, and water still dripped from its wheels. Somewhere, it must have been forded through the creek.

He studied the ground. You couldn't track anybody on the carpet-like earth. He went on through [illegible] and the cigar smell became stronger. Then he [illegible] [illegible]n, sitting on a rock with his back to him, sm[illegible]

valley through a large pair of binoculars. Silently Nick made a note of the Daf's plate numbers, took a look around for other intruders, eased Wilhelmina in the soft leather and coughed. The man whirled on his hard perch. Nick said, "Hello."

Nick smiled affably as he remembered Hawk's words—*look for a small dark beardless man.* And about fifty-five! Well!

Nicolaas G. Groot returned the smile and nodded pleasantly. "Hello. A beautiful view."

The smile and pleasantness were on the surface. Hard as steel, Nick thought. He said, "Marvelous. It is the first time I have seen it. You seem to know your way." He tipped his head in the direction of the hidden Daf.

"I've been here before, although always on foot. But there is a gate. A common lock—" Groot shrugged.

"I suppose we're both—trespassers."

"Let's say explorers. You know whose house it is?"

"Jean Batiste Van Rijn's."

"Yes." Groot was studying him. "And you're—Norman Kent?"

"Right. Mister—?"

"Groot. Nicolaas Groot. I sell diamonds, Mr. Kent, and I've heard in the city that you buy them."

"Maybe that's why we're here studying Van Rijn's? You may be going to sell and I may buy?"

"Very quickly put, Mr. Kent, but perhaps right. Since we've met, it might be that we do not need a middleman."

Nick thought swiftly. The older man had the picture in a flash. Nick shook his head slowly. "I'm not a diamond expert. And I'm not sure it would be to my advantage in the long run to anger Van Rijn."

Groot put his binoculars in the leather case slung around his shoulder. Nick watched his hands carefully. "I don't understand that. You Americans are supposed to be so sharp at business deals. Do you realize what Van Rijn's commission will be on our—this—deal?"

"A lot of money. But to me it might be insurance."

"If you're worried about the merchandise we can meet later. With your expert if he is—trustworthy."

"Van Rijn is an expert. I'm satisfied with him."

Groot came forward until he was six feet from Nick. The smaller man walked with an alert step, his spine straight, as if he moved in breeches and jackboots instead of a conservative gray suit He shook his head from side to side. "It doesn't seem to me that you are taking the best advantage of our new situation."

"You have a point, I know. Well—for openers—do you want to show me the Cullinans?"

"I might. They're nearby."

"In the car I suppose."

"Of course."

Nick tensed. The small man was too confident. He drew Wilhelmina in a fraction of a second. Groot faced the long blue barrel unperturbed except for a widening of the hard, keen eyes. Nick said, "Of course—there's someone else in the woods watching the car And you. Call him or her in here. No tricks, please. You know what a slug from this can do."

Groot did not move a muscle except those of his lips. "I'm very familiar with Lugers, Mr. Kent I hope you are familiar with the big British Webleys. There is one pointed at your back and it is in competent hands "

"Tell [illegible] "

[illegible] sometime. So kill [illegible] with me " Groot [illegible] try to hit him, Henry. If he shoots, kill him. Take the diamonds and sell them. Auf Wiedersehen."

"Are you bluffing?" Nick asked gently.

"Say something, Henry "

The voice came from behind Nick, with the hint of a sob in it. "I follow orders. Exactly You are so brave—"

Chapter 6

Nick stood still. The sun was hot on his neck. Songbirds trilled in the forest. At last Groot said, "It's called a Mexican stand-off, isn't it?"

"Sometimes. I'm surprised you know the expression."

"My hobby, Mr. Kent. Your West. Dutch and Germans had far more to do with its development than they are given credit for. Did you know that some of your Indian fighting cavalry received orders in German?"

"I had heard it."

"It is true. The Fifth Cavalry once had a band that spoke only German." He smiled as if he could hear the blare of brass on the air. "Now—business. Won't you change your mind about buying the Cullinans from me?"

"I might. Considering the circumstances. But why do you care whether I buy direct or through Van Rijn? I'll want them at his price. Or the price you were going to ask Laansma or Madam J."

"Madam J?"

"Everybody wants to sell me the Cullinans. Some woman in a big car told me to wait for her deal."

Groot frowned. The news shook him a little. Nick wondered what he would do if he mentioned the CD man or Hawk. "This complicates matters," Groot said. "We should conclude our arrangement at once."

except that his voice had an odd fanatic quality to it Henry? Oh Henry! I hope you have that thing pointed somewhere else if you stumble. If it was one of the big sturdy government Webleys it had no safety. They crossed the few feet of ground and could see the Daf through the trees, looking like a child's toy left among model railroad scenery.

The voice came from behind him, shortly after there was a rustling of tree limbs. "Drop that gun!"

Nick got the picture in a flash, leaped to his left and whirled around, snapping out words. "Tell Henry to obey Groot. She is with me."

"What will I do?" snarled the small man Nick saw ten feet behind where he had stood. A few feet behind the little man—who held the Webley firmly, following Nick with the muzzle—Mata Nasut crouched where she had dropped from a tree. She had a small blue automatic pointed at Henry's back.

"Stand still," Nick said. He fought down an impulse to draw Wilhelmina.

"Yes—hold still," Groot growled. "Kent—tell her to drop that gun."

"Let's all put our weapons away," Nick said soothingly. "I was first. Tell Henry—"

"No," Groot said. "We do it my way. Drop—"

Nick dove forward in a somersault—McDonald's Singapore rolling dive. The Webley roared over his head as his body was flat on the ground, covering the ten feet between him and the Webley with the speed of a rolled hoop. As he came up from the ground, his feet doubled back to support him in a crouch; he was almost under Henry's outthrust gun hand.

Nick was canted to the right, his hands leading his head and trunk. They came up under the Webley as it blasted again, locked in under the big gun and the small hand and Henry was dragged with him as he completed his fall the gun pointing first at the sky and then above the two

men sprawled on the ground. Nick took the revolver away from Henry like a mother taking a rattle from a baby and bounced to his feet, whirling as Mata snarled at Groot like a female tigress. "Don't—don't—"

Groot's hand was inside his jacket. He froze. Nick held the Webley by its barrel. "Easy, Groot. Let's all calm down." He watched Henry from the corner of an eye The small man stumbled erect, gasping for breath, but he did not reach for another weapon if he carried one.

"Bring your hand out empty," Nick urged "We're on even terms now. But nothing else need change "

Groot's icy eyes met gray ones that were less cold but inflexible as polished granite The tableau remained fixed for several seconds, except for Henry's cough, then Groot slowly withdrew an empty hand. "I see we underestimated you, Mr. Kent. A serious tactical mistake."

Nick grinned and Groot looked puzzled "Aw—if we'd each had three or four people with us, think how long this sort of thing might have kept up You don't have any more men hidden in the trees, [illegible]?"

[illegible] *fraid* yo[illegible]."

[illegible] shook his head, made no answer. Groot said drily, "You have excellent reflexes for a businessman. You aren't—anything else?"

"Just a Yankee who's used to handling *guns* " It was the kind of absurd remark that just might work with a man whose hobby was the American West and who had a tremendous ego. These primitive Americans, he would think, wait till the tables are turned

Nick's next move disconcerted him, but it was too late to checkmate it. The American came closer to him, thrusting the Webley away inside his belt, and suddenly thrust his hand inside Groot's jacket and plucked a short-barreled .38 from Groot's clamshell belt holster It was all over in an instant. The American's limbs were hard as

oak. Groot knew that if he moved he might discover the big man had other surprising reflexes. Grit your teeth and wait.

"Now we can all be friendly," Nick said. "I'll give these back to you when we part. Thanks Mata—"

She came to his side, her lovely dark face completely composed. "I followed because you might have misunderstood—I don't know Van Rijn well. Or what his—policies, is that the word?—may be."

"It's as good a word as any. Maybe we don't need him now, eh, Groot? Let's have a look at those Cullinans."

The four walked through the forest to the Daf. Henry looked at his leader. Groot said, "Get them, Henry."

Henry produced keys, climbed around in the car, came out with a small brown bag. Nick said boyishly, "Gee, I thought they'd be bigger than that."

"Less than four pounds," Groot observed. "All that value in so small a package." He put the parcel on the roof of the little car, fumbled with a drawstring which secured one end of it like a moneybag.

"All those tomatoes in one little-bitty can," Nick mur-...d.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Old Yankee maxim. Motto of a canning company in St. Joseph, Missouri, in 1873."

"Ah! I had not heard it. I must remember. All those tomatoes—" Groot repeated the phrase carefully as he dug at the cord.

Mata said sharply, "People are coming. On horses."

"Groot," Nick said. "Give the bag to Henry. Quick. Have him put it back."

Groot tossed the packet to Henry who was already diving for the car's interior. It went from one man to the other like an NFL handoff on a smooth, tight spinner. Henry's back wiggled as he worked in the car, replacing the diamonds in their hiding place. Nick watched him and the portion of the forest at which Mata was looking. You

mustn't underestimate these two old boys. You could wind up very far in the rear, or even dead.

Four horses came through the trees, following the faint tracks left by the Daf. They were medium-size, sturdy saddle horses of about 15.2 hands—called ponies in Europe. Riding the first one was Van Rijn's man who had accosted Nick at the hotel, the younger of the pair who had been unarmed; he had accompanied the one who had worn black gloves and carried the Colt .32 automatic which he claimed he had bought in Brattleboro, Vermont. Only Nick's exceptionally keen vision and photographic memory for faces enabled him to identify the man, for he was riding the chestnut horse well-balanced, light-handed . . . and stark naked.

Nick had only a moment to approve the man's horsemanship before noticing the two girls and a man who rode the other horses. The man sat well, although not as perfectly as the lead rider—there is a precise point-of-balance to sitting a horse which you either have or haven't, and some cowboys never achieve it—and the girls were just average. They rode Indian bareback style, hunched and bent-kneed. But one thing the four had in common—there wasn't a stitch of clothes on any one of them.

Nick growled to Groot, "Know them?"

"No. Decadent young fools." Groot ran his tongue over his lips as he watched the girls approach.

"Do you have nudist camps around here?"

"I suppose so."

"Van Rijn a swinger?"

"I don't know. Give us back our guns."

"When we part."

"I think—I think I recognize that fellow in front," Groot muttered.

"He works for V[illegible]"

[illegible] halted. Nick decided the girls were

stunning, and there was something exciting about them nude on a horse—the succubus cavalry. Centaurs witl lovely breasts that the motion of the horses kept in con stant agitation so they drew your eyes like magnets. Wha to call them . . . gay Centauros? The man Nick recognizec said, "Welcome, trespassers. I guess you know you're or Mr. Van Rijn's estate."

Nick watched the brown-haired girl. Milky white pat terns on her deep tan, tiny strips of skin in a Bikin design, showed that she wasn't a full-time nudist. The other girl, whose long black hair reached below her shoul ders, was browned all over.

Groot answered. "Mr. Van Rijn is expecting me."

"In the back gate? So early?"

"Ah—then he told you I was coming."

"You and many others. Now we'll all go down and see him."

"Suppose I don't agree?" Groot suggested in the pre cise, cool tones he had used during the Mexican stand-of with Nick—before Mata changed the odds.

"You have no choice."

"Perhaps not." Groot looked at Nick. "Let's get into the car and see. Come Henry."

Groot and his shadow went to the car, followed by Mata and Nick. Nick thought swiftly—this case was get ting more complex every moment. He must not clog his channels to Laansma which might lead him to his firs objectives, the pipeline of intelligence-espionage and Whit lock's killers. On the other hand Groot and the Cullinans would be powerful leverage to hold, and he had his suspi cions about Groot-Geiser and his possible connection to Manson's and Whitlock's death.

At the side of the little car Groot paused. The horse party had followed them. "Please, Mr. Kent—our guns—"

"Let's not have any shooting. Would you bang away at *that*?" Nick gestured at the brown-haired girl, a mountec nymph who now wore a mischievous grin.

"Will you drive, then?"

"Sure." Groot didn't want Nick or Mata in the rear compartment; they might have seen just where Henry hid the package. Nick wondered how Groot planned to prevent Van Rijn's people finding the Cullinans. The small car wouldn't be hard to search. The four squeezed in, Groot in front with Nick. The rider Nick recognized came up beside the driver's window. Nick rolled it down. The man said, "Circle the hill and get on the horse trail and follow it down to the house."

"Suppose I decide to go another way?"

The horseman smiled. "I remember your fast draw, Mr. Kent, and I suppose you're carrying your gun now. But look—" He gestured at some far trees. Nick saw another horseman, dressed in dark trousers and a black turtleneck sweater. He carried what looked like a submachine gun.

Nick swallowed. They'd be fish in a barrel in this thing—no, sardines in a can "I see some of you wear clothes."

"Sure."

"But you prefer . . . uh . . . the sunshine?" Nick looked beyond the rider at the two pretty girls.

"It's a matter of choice. Mr. Van Rijn has an artist's group and a nudist camp and a place for squares at the main house. You could fit in with them."

"Still sore about the hotel scene, eh?"

"Not a bit. You went where we wanted you to. Now drive down the horse path and stop at the house."

Nick started the engine, gunned it appreciatively. It had a smooth purr. He checked himself out swiftly on the controls and instruments He had driven almost every kin[illegible]

trai[illegible]

a D[illegible] he recalled that they had a mult[illegible] [illegible]d. Why of some kind which was supposed to be ve[illegible] not? It had worked well on [illegible] Harley-[illegible]

He drove slowly, corkscrewing through the trees, getting the feel of the car. It handled nicely. When he reached the bridle path he intentionally turned the wrong way, south instead of north, and was gunning along at a fair clip when the posse caught up. "Hey—the other way."

Nick stopped. "Uh? I figured it went to the house either way."

"It does, but this way is longer and you have to ford the creek again. Turn around."

"Okay." Nick backed into an opening between the manicured trees, headed down the trail which offered him a long straightaway on which to get started, and opened her up. "Hang on, gang."

The little car clawed itself quickly up to a decent speed, spurting gravel and crushed stone at the riders like a hound dog digging in a fox bank. They were rolling about forty miles an hour when they reached the first turn, and the Daf cornered nicely and whipped into a mild S curve with little sway and good traction. Nick followed the mooth, narrow roadway with the concentration of a country boy leading a holiday road race, braking and pouring it on, using the turf here and there to catch the wheels and hold the car away from trees.

Someone grunted or gasped as they shot out of the forest and saw before them a long, gentle incline leading down to the buildings in the distance. The bridle path was almost straight, following the planted fields to its left. On the right side was a parallel jump course—stone fences, hedges, post and rails, and prettily painted oxers and targets. "Lovely country," Nick said cheerfully, and fed all the juice the motor would take. It drank it and growled gratefully without a bobble—they built a good carburetor into these little skates. "How's the cavalry doing?"

Henry's voice answered from the rear. "They are just coming out of the woods. The gravel in their faces slowed them up. Now we're gaining on them."

"The guy with the machine gun with them?"

"Yes."

"Is he going to shoot?"

"No."

"Let me know if he aims that thing. I don't think I will—" Nick grunted as he braked hard and skidde neatly into a left turn, following the trail toward wha looked like stables. The rear end started to fade forwar and he steered right and into it and felt the slide catcl nicely as they completed the curve and made a smal fishtail as the car straightened into the path, which turned again around the barn ahead. He duplicated the turn, let the car shoot through the canyon-like passage between two buildings, and they came out into a spacious, stone-flagged courtyard with a big iron fountain in the middle.

Across the courtyard a broad, paved driveway led past a bank of a dozen garages, then flanked the big house, and went on toward what should be the public highway. The trouble was, as Nick evaluated the situation in a fraction of a second, there was no way around the big horse van and dump truck parked right across the drive. They reached from the garages to the stone fence on the right, plugging the roadway like a corked bottle. Nick spun the Daf around the circular courtyard three times, feeling as if he was driving a roulette ball, before he saw the first of the riders galloping toward them between the buildings. It was just a glance—a peek in a slot as they flashed past.

"Get ready, kiddies," Nick said. "Hang on."

He braked sharply, stopping on the next circle with the nose of the car thirty feet from the opening between the buildings through which the riders were coming. He glanced at the horse van barrier. Van Rijn and the man who liked his Colt and two other men and a woman had come out from behind the vehicles and were watching the courtyard. They looked puzzled.

Nick stuck his head out of the window and Van Rijn and grinned. Van Rijn tilted his h

raised a hand just as the riders started popping out of the passageway and hid him from view. Nick counted aloud, "One—two—three—four—" One short. "Last girl takes her chances."

He gunned the car back into the opening as the riders fought to halt their mounts, iron shoes clanging and slipping on the stones. The girl with the long black hair—the poorest rider, sitting in her schoolgirl show-off bareback crouch—was coming up the aisle. Nick hit the horn, touched the brakes just in case, he had no intention of hitting her, and whizzed past her on the right hand side. He made a mental bet that she didn't dodge him—the horse did. But sloppy rider or not, she made a gorgeous picture, bareass on that pony.

They rolled at speed back up the long stretch of trail past the jump course and into the forest. It shouldn't be hard to plan—when he crossed the bridge the section of trail which ran along the back country road where he had parked the Volvo would be close ahead.

Nick said, "We've got a car out on the road. Shall I ... the fence or try your gate with the lock?"

Groot answered with the pleased tones of a man pointing out a tactical mistake. It was the first time Nick heard him sound cheerful. "They may have sabotaged your car. Test it. Let us try the gate. I will show you."

Nick felt chagrined. Groot was, of course, right. They whizzed past the fence near the road, caught a glimpse of the Volvo, made several mild S-turns, and Groot said, "Just ahead. Turn off past that next clump and you'll see it."

Faint tire tracks appeared in the turf. Nick braked, swung left, saw the big gate ahead, barring them from ... country road. He stopped and Groot jumped out ... trotted to the lock. He efficiently inserted a large key ... tried to turn it . . . and tried, and twisted, and shook ... lost his cool, struggled with the lock.

A motor roared behind them and a big Opel p...

and stopped inches from their rear bumper, pinning the smaller car between itself and the gate It disgorged men like nickels from a slot machine slot when the jackpot is hit. Nick climbed out of the car and called to Groot, "That was a nice try on the gate," before he turned to face the mob.

Chapter 7

Philipine Laansma left his office early for the long weekend, pointing his red MG toward Geesteren with a sigh of relief. He had problems—sometimes it helped to think about them while driving. He was pleased that his current girl friend—a daughter of an excellent family who wanted to become a *tooneelspeelster* like Bette Davis—was in Paris meeting with a producer who might have a part for her in a movie he was making in Spain.

Problems! The dangerous but profitable pipeline he had put together for carrying information from the United States to anyone who would buy it was clogged at this end as long as Groot refused to carry on. He had thought that Amlie had discovered the system's machinery at Kelley's Color Engraving Studios in New York, but he had been wrong. Thank heavens Oom had missed her with that stupid shot. Groot could be replaced. Europe swarmed with eager and hopeful spies, couriers and hustlers who would like to be spies—as long as it was reasonably safe and profitable.

Groot's Cullinans were the rainbow's pot of gold. It should be possible to turn a profit of over half a million guilders on them. His contacts reported that dozens of Amsterdam sharpshooters—the ones with real capital—were sniffing after the prize. That would explain Norman Kent's unusual adventures. They wanted to contact him—

but he, Philipine, already had. If he swung the Cullinan deal for Bard Galleries, they might become customers for many years

Eventually he might be able to buy a bigger estate, like Van Rijn's. He scowled at the thought. Van Rijn! He was intensely jealous of the older man. They both came from families that operated *stoombootmaatschappij*—steamer companies—but Laansma had sold his in order to enter lines that promised faster profits. Van Rijn still had his, as well as Far East plantations, tobacco companies, oil interests and his diamond operations It was hard to overtake entrenched holdings like those, it was like trying to match the royal family's wealth. Rulers didn't need treasure houses any longer—the loot poured in from their worldwide stock holdings in such streams they could swim in it.

He came to an empty stretch on the International Highway and broke the speed regulations. It gave him a feeling of power. Tomorrow Groot and the Cullinans and Kent would be at his country place. The deal would profit Philipine Laansma even if he had to use Oom Myer and Beppo and Mack to turn the trick. This was no world for weaklings. He wished he had lived in the days when Van Rijn's ancestors and other ancients got their starts. You didn't look aside, you just wrung it out of the natives.

Jean Batiste Van Rijn knew of Laansma's envy. It was a fact he kept on file in his keen mind along with many, many others. In spite of what Laansma thought, Van Rijn's great-grandfather had not brutalized the natives in Sumatra and Java. He had had eight killed and the rest worked diligently for small rewards Big men know the difference between the stick and the carrot.

As Van Rijn walked up to the imprisoned Daf he was smiling slightly, symbolizing the carrot. "Good morning Mr. Kent—you're early."

Nick matched him with a small grin. "Got here early.

Lost my way. I was looking your place over. It's beautiful."

"Thank you. I saw part of your motor tour. You outdistanced the escort."

"I couldn't see their badges."

"No—they belong to our little nudist colony. You'd be surprised how well behaved they are. I think it's because their frustrations and repressions are out in the open."

"Could be. They don't conceal much." As they chatted Nick weighed it up. Van Rijn had four men with him who, after their eruption from the Opel like olives suddenly released from a bottle, now lined up respectfully behind their boss. They all wore ties and jackets and had the bland, purposeful faces Nick was beginning to identify with the sturdy Dutch. Mata and Groot and Henry had clambered out of the Daf and were clustered hesitantly at its side. Nick sighed. His only logical course was to go farther into the parlor and hope that, if Van Rijn and his crew were spiders, they mistook the wasp for a fly. Nick said, "Although I'm early perhaps we can get down to business."

"Have you mentioned the matter to Mr. Groot?"

"Yes. We met by chance. We both—lost our way and were coming in your back door. He told me he's part of the deal you and I are considering."

Van Rijn looked at Groot. He wasn't smiling now. He looked like a dignified, unswervable English justice of George III. The type who insisted that the ten-year-old children before his court be well behaved and quiet as he sentenced them to death by hanging for stealing food. His expression indicated that he knew when to be kind and when to be firm—and you'd better believe it. "Did you show Mr. Kent the details?"

Groot flashed a glance at Nick. Nick looked up at a treetop, admiring the pruning. Groot replied, "No. We just discovered that we all—have mutual interests."

"I see." Van Rijn turned to one of his men. "Alan.

Unlock the gate and bring Mr. Kent's Volvo to the house. The rest of you ride back in the Daf." He motioned to Nick and his group "Won't you join me? The big car is much more comfortable."

Nick introduced Mata to Van Rijn who nodded appreciatively. They agreed they had met briefly but couldn't remember the party. Nick made a bet with himself that they both recalled it and in detail. If you ever took a chance on this phlegmatic but keen man forgetting something, or the beautiful girl not remembering a face or a fact, you'd be guaranteed a loss. Mata had stayed alive by staying alert. You could guess that generations of stolid Van Rijns had created this extensive estate by keeping their eyes and ears open every waking moment.

The man called Alan had no trouble at all unlocking the gate. As he walked toward the Volvo Van Rijn said to Groot, "We change the locks around here frequently."

"A clever tactic," Groot said as he held the Opel's door for Mata. He followed her into the car, and Nick and Van Rijn took the folding seats. Henry watched, then joined the driver.

Groot said, "The Daf—"

"I know," Van Rijn answered calmly. "One of my men—Adriaen—will bring it to the house and guard it. It is a valuable car" He added the last phrase with just the right amount of emphasis to mean *we know what's in it.*

They rolled majestically back through the estate to the main house, passing a yellow road machine which already was sweeping the bridle path, eliminating both tire tracks and hoof prints. You couldn't fault Van Rijn on maintenance.

The horse van and truck were gone from the stone-surfaced drive. They went along it and circled the immense house that looked as if it were painted every year and the gleaming windows washed every morning. On the far side was a large, black-topped park[illegible] which held [illegible]. They about forty cars and had room for [illegible]

e almost all new, and many were expensive makes. k memorized several tags on the largest limousines. n Rijn had a lot of friends or guests—probably both. The little group got out of the Opel and Van Rijn led m on a leisurely stroll through gardens which flanked e house on the far side. Gardens with shaded conversa-n nooks carpeted with smooth green grass, edged with tonishing parades of tulips and furnished with wrought-on furniture—chaise lounges with foam rubber cushions, eck chairs and tables with sunbrellas. Van Rijn bowed to ne nook where two bridge games were in progress.

They climbed wide stone steps and came to a big swimming pool. A dozen people lounged on the patio and splashed in the water. From the corner of his eye Nick saw Van Rijn give a small smile of pleasure at the sight. An amazing man. You felt that he was dangerous yet not evil. You could imagine him ordering, "Give that stupid boy twenty lashes." And if you suggested leniency he would say with a surprised lift of his neat gray brows, "But one must be practical."

Their host said, "Miss Nasut—Mr. Hasbrouck—that first cabana is mine. You'll find drinks and ice and swim suits there. Enjoy some sun and the water while Mr. Groot and Mr. Kent and I take care of some business. If you'll excuse us—we won't be long."

He led the way toward the house without waiting for answers. Nick gave Mata a quick nod and wink and went with him.

Just before they entered the house Nick heard two cars drive into the parking area, out of sight beyond the plant-ings. He was sure he recognized the Volvo and the odd hum of the Daf. Van Rijn's man who had driven the Opel, a wiry lad with a determined look, paced ten feet behind them as he had done all the way through the grounds. When they entered a large, beautifully furnished office-study, the man took up a position beside the door. Efficient and unobtrusive, Nick thought admiringly.

One wall of the room was lined with ship models, on shelves and in glass cases atop tables. Van Rijn pointed at one. "Do you recognize it?"

Nick could not read the nameplate in Dutch script. "No."

"She was the first ship built in what is now New York City. The *Onrust*. It means unrest in English. Prophetic, perhaps? She was built with the help of the Manhattan Indians at about where 45 Broadway is now. The New York Yacht Club has offered me a very large price for the model. I won't sell—but I have willed it to them at my death."

"Very generous of you," Nick said.

Van Rijn went behind a wide desk of rich, black wood that almost glowed. "Now—Mr. Groot, are you armed?"

Groot actually blushed. He looked at Nick. Nick took the short .38 out of his pocket and pushed it across the desk. Van Rijn dropped it into a drawer without comment. "I assume you have the merchandise in your car or hidden somewhere on my grounds?"

"Yes," Groot said crisply.

"Would you say this is a good time to get it—and we can discuss terms?"

"Yes." Groot turned toward the door.

"Tony will go with you so you won't lose your way." Groot went out with the wiry lad at his heels.

Nick said, "Groot can be—elusive."

"I know. Tony is dependable. If they do not come back I will conclude that he is dead. Now Mr. Kent about our transaction—if you make what deposit you can here, can you pay the balance in cash in Switzerland or your own country?"

Nick sat down slowly in a large leath[illegible]hair. "Perh[illegible] —if you take responsibility for del[illegible] the Unit[illegible] States. I'm not an expert at smuggling[illegible]

"That I can handle. There remain[illegible]

"And inspecting the merchandise.'

"Of course. We will do that in a moment—"

The intercom chimed. Van Rijn frowned. "Yes?"

A girl's voice came from a speaker. "Mr. Jan de Troija and two friends. He insists it is very important."

Nick stiffened. Across his mind flashed the memory of a hard jaw under a cold glass eye and expressionless artificial skin and the woman in the black veil. Uncontrolled emotions flowed briefly across Van Rijn's face—surprise, determination, chagrin. His host did not expect these visitors and he was thinking fast. If Van Rijn was losing control of the situation it was time for a stranger to move. Nick stood up, "You must excuse me—"

"Sit down."

"I'm armed, too." Wilhelmina glared suddenly at Van Rijn with her expressionless Cyclop's eye. He put his hands down on the desk. "You probably have all kinds of buttons under your feet. Don't push them unless you want lots of violence."

Van Rijn was solemn faced again, as if this was something he understood and could handle. "No violence is necessary. Just sit down, please." It was a stern command.

Nick said from the door, "Meeting postponed," and went through it. De Troija *and* Van Rijn *and* a horde of troops. There were too many loose ends for an AXEman to hold still under the potential weight of this crew.

He ran back the way they had come, across a giant living room and through the glass doors that led down to the pool. As he went down the wide steps three at a time Mata, seated in front of the cabana with Henry Hasbrouck, saw him coming. She got up without a word and ran toward him. Nick gave a *come on* wave and turned and galloped through the grounds toward the parking lot.

He caught Groot and Tony at the Daf. Tony leaned against the car, watching Groot's small rump just inside the door as he groped in the rear of the car. Nick had tucked Wilhelmina out of sight and he grinned at Tony

who pushed himself off the car and swung to meet him, balanced on both legs. "What do you—"

The wiry lad was prepared for all kinds of attacks except a clean right which hooked slightly as it drove in faster than the eye could follow just under the bottom button of his jacket. The blow would have shattered a one-inch plank. Tony folded like a book snapped shut and before he squirmed twice on the ground Nick's powerful fingers closed on his neck muscles, the thumb punching in the spinal control cord. Tony would be useless to anyone for five minutes no matter how rugged he was. Nick extracted a small Italian automatic from the lad's belt and straightened to face Groot who stumbled out of the car holding the small brown bag

Nick held out a hand Like a robot Groot put the bag in it. Nick heard the patter of Mata's feet coming across the tarmac. He glanced back No one followed her or him—yet. He said, "Groot—we can talk about our deal later. I'll hold the merchandise. Then if they catch you you're clean."

Groot stood straight, speaking crisply. "And I have the problem of catching you?"

"I'm giving you no choice."

"Where's Henry?"

"At the pool last I saw He's okay. I don't believe they'll bother him. Now you better roll out of here."

Nick beckoned to Mata and ran to the Volvo which had been parked four spaces away from the Daf. The keys were in it. Nick gunned the engine as Mata hopped in. She said without puffing, "My what a short visit."

"Too many hosts." Nick answered, reversed the car and whipped around the oval lot and headed for the highway. As he picked up speed he shot a glance back. The Da was moving From the house Henry came at a run, fol lowed by Alan and Adriaen and de Troija and one of the men who had been in the garage with the veiled woman None of them had guns in sigh [illegible] ick [illegible]

driving, cut the corners of the double-curves between t
regimented trees and entered a straightaway that led to t
highway.

Forty feet or so back from the main road were t
squat, stone structures, one joined to a neat stone ga
house. As he floored the accelerator he saw the wide, stur
iron gates begin to close. He considered a lot of things
once—but he kept the throttle wide open. Stone past
fences came up to the gatehouse and the stone squares
each side. You couldn't crash them. He judged the opening between the gates as they swung toward each other.

Fifteen feet? Say fourteen! Now thirteen—twelve—eleven—

The gates swung faster, folding shut in their faces. They were majestic metal barriers, so heavy their outer ends rolled on small carrier wheels like casters. The vertical bars were six inches apart, made of iron two inches thick. Any car that crashed them head-on would be demolished.

Eight—seven—

He kept the spewing carburetor wide open, rolling the ball of his foot over the pedal with an extra push and press. They sure as hell weren't going to ever *stop* now. They were whizzing past trees and blurred landscape at well over sixty and still accelerating.

Mata bent over. From the corner of his eye he saw her fold her arms over her head—she'd rather have a broken back and neck than scarred features. He didn't blame her. He estimated the remaining opening, tried to steer at it centered to a hairline measurement.

Clang—skleek—*cranng*! A metallic screech—and they shot through the vanishing opening. One or both of the gates had closed on the Volvo like shark's teeth snapping at a fleeing fish. Their speed had added enough longitudinal rigidity to carry them through, helped perhaps by some play in the gates and their hangers which the slashing force of their contact had gained. An inch of vibration—the difference between freedom and disaster.

The highway was close. Nick stabbed the brakes, pumped them again as they raced at it. He did not dare fishtail or sideslip—she'd turn over. The blacktop was gritty and dry, ideal for traction but don't try to slide on it unless you saw an oil slick. And he saw none.

The highway was a right-angle T across Van Rijn's drive. Nick used every foot of curve he could see. They shot behind a bus and his luck held—nothing coming the other way. The Volvo's wheels circled within inches of the far edge of the road.

There was a four-foot-drop bank at the far edge. They skirted it in a shower of flying gravel. He was sure a rear wheel swung out over it for an instant—you could feel the wobble and sidesway as the sturdy little car fought and clawed for a hold. No more brake—he gunned the motor. The car serpentined, staggered erect like a man who has stumbled, and they roared down the two-lane highway.

Mata raised her head "Whew—woosh."

Nick shot a glance back at Van Rijn's drive. A man had run out of the gatehouse and was looking at them and shaking his fist. Good. If he didn't get the gate open he would delay any pursuers.

"Do you know this road?" he asked.

"No." She groped in the locker for maps "What happened back there? They serve you bad Scotch."

Nick chuckled. It did him good He had been imagining Mata and himself scrambled in an iron and stone omelet. "I never even got a drink."

"At least I got a sip of mine. I wonder what they will do to Henry Hasbrouck and Groot. They are odd little men."

"Odd? Like scorpions "

"I mean to have stolen the Cullinans."

"Groot did that. Henry is his shadow I imagine that Van Rijn will simply throw them out What value are they to him now? He may not even want them to be seen by

Jan de Troija. He's the British diplomat type I told you introduced me to that mystery woman."

"He was there?"

"Just arrived. That's why I decided to get away. Too many angles. Too many clutching hands after the Cullinans. Take a look in that little bag and see if Groot pulled a switch on us. I don't think he had time, but it's a thought."

Mata opened the bag. She said, "I don't know much about uncut stones, but these are big."

"They're record size, I understand." Nick glanced over. The objects in Mata's lap looked like small pieces of high-grade rock candy. "I guess we got 'em. Put 'em away and check that map."

They raced around a gentle curve where picturesque bridges crossed small canals or streams on both sides. If they had been going more slowly he might have tried one of the roads—then he shook his head. Too close to Van Rijn's. A thorough search would find them, especially if the lanes were dead-ends. Far back, a beetle in the mirror, he saw a car that did not gain on them. Van Rijn was slow in following—or had he given up? No, he wouldn't.

"Junction ahead," he said. "Check the signs against the map. Our compass direction is south."

"Which way would you prefer to go?"

"Northeast."

Mata was silent for a moment. "I'd go straight. If we turn left we have to go back through Wanroy and we might run into them, if they're following us. Go on to Gemert and then we'll turn east and we'll have a choice of roads."

"You've called it. I'm not stopping to look at the map."

The four-way intersection led them onto a better road, but there was more traffic, a small parade of little polished cars. Local people.

"Watch our backtrail," Nick said. "This mirror is too

small. See if any cars are passing others, trying to catch us."

Mata kneeled on the seat, looking back. After several minutes she said, "Everybody is staying in line. I mean—if there was a car following, it could pass some of them."

"Damn funny," Nick muttered.

As they approached the town the landscape became more crowded. The neat little houses stood shoulder to shoulder, there were no more pastures with sleek-coated cows that looked as if they had been washed—and perhaps they had. Mata turned around. "Take two lefts."

"Okay." They were approaching another intersection, in an industrial area with closely fitted, narrow side streets. A helicopter droned overhead. He searched for a road block. Did Van Rijn have such good connections? Certainly de Troija might have, if they were now allied against him.

He moved slowly through the town traffic, made the two lefts, and they rolled on into another rural area. No road blocks, no pursuers.

"There aren't any cars that seem to stay with us," Mata said. "Shall I keep watching?"

"No. Sit down I'm going fast enough to spot anybody who tries to catch up. But it's a puzzle. He could have caught us in the Opel."

"The helicopter?" Mata asked calmly. "It went over us again."

"Where would he get one so fast?"

"I don't know. Perhaps it is a traffic control." She put her head out the window. "It's gone way ahead."

"Let's get off this road Can you find another one that makes a loop so that we can still head east and north?"

The map crackled "Try the second right. About five miles ahead. It goes through forests, too, and then after we cross the Maas we can go north on the big highway to Nijmegen."

The turnoff looked good. Another two-lane coun road. After they had traveled a couple of mi

slowed down and said, "Not a sign of anybody following us."

"A small plane went over us."

"I know. You're a good girl on detail, Mata."

She moved across the seat and snuggled against him. "It has helped me to survive," she replied softly.

He put an arm around her soft body. Soft—but how strong her muscle and bone and brain were, developed as she said, to survive. Their relationship was a strange one. He admired her for the many qualities she had which matched his own—and first among them were durability and alertness and swift reflexes. Many times during warm, perfumed nights in Jakarta she had said, "I love you," and he had returned the averment.

And being the people they were they had meant it, for the night or as long as it might last. It was why, when she might have caused his death and thus saved herself a fortune—she could not. And why he, when logic had called for her elimination—he had not. He had offered her banishment, and with wry smiles which each understood, she had accepted it.

"You're as beautiful as ever, Mata," he said softly. "But we don't belong to the beautiful people. We're the durable people."

She squeezed his knee. "Which would you choose, if you could?"

"To be? Since we just twinkle for an instant on this ball of mud I take durable."

"Because you feel the bumps less?"

"And you can help another twinkler. The beautiful ones often fold fast."

She kissed his neck, just under his ear. He said, "That feels nice. Now—look at that." He slowed and braked.

On the bank of a small stream, nestled under tremendous trees that looked like willows, was a tiny camping ground, an oblong carved out of the cultivated fields that came right down to the road and streamside. A swing

bridge crossed the little canal which paralled the road they were on, and the stream apparently went under the canal or the canal crossed over it in a wooden channel. Yellow stakes marked the corners of three campsites, and all of them were occupied.

A big Rover was in the first one, a Volkswagen in the second with a camping tarpaulin attached to it, and a battered Triumph was in the last one, parked beside a large umbrella tent with an aluminum outside frame. The umbrella tent was old and faded to a thin, light green.

"There's our man," Nick said He drove over the swing bridge and along the narrow track to pull up beside the Triumph. It was a four- or five-year-old TR4, and at a closer look was more worn than battered, recording a life of sun and rain and flying sand and gravel. Its tires were quite good.

Nick got out and a lean, all-brown man in faded khaki shorts with fringes for bottom hems left a little campfire and walked toward them. Nick put out his hand. "Hello, I'm Norman Kent. American "

"I'm Buffer Whicker Australian." His grip was firm and hearty.

"That's my new wife in the car." Nick glanced toward the Volkswagen. A couple were seated under the tarpaulin, within hearing distance. He lowered his voice. "Can we step over by the stream. I've a proposition that might interest you."

Buffer followed him, saying, "I can offer you a cup of tea, but if you're selling anything you've got the wrong bloke."

Nick took out his wallet, removed five 100-guilder notes and five U.S. twenty-dollar bills, holding them against his stomach so that those in the other campsites could not see them. "I'm not selling I'm renting Anyone with you?"

"My girl Asleep in the tent."

"We were just married. My so-called frier

for us, you know the bit. Usually I wouldn't care, but as I think you lads say Down Under, some of the boys are bloody bastards."

Buffer looked at the money and sighed. "Norman, for that you can not only stay with us you can travel rent-free all the way to Calais."

"It's simpler than that. I'd like you and your girl to drive to a nearby town and enjoy a good hotel or motel. Don't say anything about leaving your outfit and campsite here, of course. All you have to leave us is the tent and tarp and a couple of sleeping bags or blankets. The money I'm giving you should be worth more than the outfit you leave."

Buffer took the money. "You look straight, mate. We'll leave you all the stuff except our personal gear. There's not much. Few odds and ends of cooking things and grub."

"How about the neighbors?"

"I know them. I'll tell them you're my cousin who is using the camp for the night."

"A deal. Will you help me hide my car?"

"Drive 'er around this side of the tent. We'll camouflage her somehow."

Within fifteen minutes Buffer had rigged a tent fly which hid the Volvo's rear from the road, yet looked plausible, introduced "Norman Kent, my cousin" to the other two camping couples, and departed with his cute plump blonde in the Triumph.

The interior of the tent was comfortable, with a folding table, chairs and sleeping bags on air mattresses. A cleverly crafted wooden cabinet, apparently made to fit in the Triumph, served as a pantry. Its various slots and shelves were filled with dishes, silverware and a small amount of canned goods. Nick brought in his luggage from the Volvo, took a bottle of Jim Beam out of his case, put it on the table and said, "Sweetie, I'm going to have a look around. Will you mix up a couple?"

"Love to." She hugged him, kissed his chin and stepped away.

A lot of woman, he thought as he walked to the bridge over the canal. She knew what to, when to, and how to—and when not to. He crossed the little bridge and studied the camp. You could hardly see the Volvo. A little red and black barge, powered by a purring outboard motor, slowly approached the bridge. Nick walked back over it to the camp bank to watch its passage. The skipper stepped to the walkway at the canal's side and spun a giant wooden wheel which swung the bridge aside like a gate. He stepped back aboard and the barge crawled past like a snail with flowers on its head. The waterman waved at him.

Nick walked alongside. "Don't you have to close the bridge?"

"No" The man laughed, his English was roundly accented, as if each word came wrapped in pastry. "Time clock in the locker. In ten minutes it closes. A bell will ring. You will see." He pointed his pipe at Nick and laughed more heartily "Electric. See. We are not all tulips and tobacco. Ho-ho-ho."

"Yo-ho-ho to you," Nick replied, but he laughed heartily as he spoke. "Why not open it with a button then, instead of the wheel?"

The bargeman looked around the empty landscape as if alarmed. "Shhh!" He selected a bunch of pretty flowers from one of the boxes stacked on the deck and hopped ashore and put his head close to Nick's "If we did that *tourists like you wouldn't come to watch it any more and* ask questions. Here is a gift" Nick was looking into twinkling blue eyes as the bouquet was pressed into his hand and the man jumped back onto his toy-like boat.

"Thank you very much. My wife will like them."

"Peace." The man waved and the barge's stern purred past Nick.

As he strolled back toward the campsite the bridge

for us, you know the bit. Usually I wouldn't care, but as I think you lads say Down Under, some of the boys are bloody bastards."

Buffer looked at the money and sighed. "Norman, for that you can not only stay with us you can travel rent-free all the way to Calais."

"It's simpler than that. I'd like you and your girl to drive to a nearby town and enjoy a good hotel or motel. Don't say anything about leaving your outfit and campsite here, of course. All you have to leave us is the tent and tarp and a couple of sleeping bags or blankets. The money I'm giving you should be worth more than the outfit you leave."

Buffer took the money. "You look straight, mate. We'll leave you all the stuff except our personal gear. There's not much. Few odds and ends of cooking things and grub."

"How about the neighbors?"

"I know them. I'll tell them you're my cousin who is using the camp for the night."

"A deal. Will you help me hide my car?"

"Drive 'er around this side of the tent. We'll camouflage somehow."

Within fifteen minutes Buffer had rigged a tent fly which hid the Volvo's rear from the road, yet looked plausible, introduced "Norman Kent, my cousin" to the other two camping couples, and departed with his cute plump blonde in the Triumph.

The interior of the tent was comfortable, with a folding table, chairs and sleeping bags on air mattresses. A cleverly crafted wooden cabinet, apparently made to fit in the Triumph, served as a pantry. Its various slots and shelves were filled with dishes, silverware and a small amount of canned goods. Nick brought in his luggage from the Volvo, took a bottle of Jim Beam out of his case, put it on the table and said, "Sweetie, I'm going to have a look around. Will you mix up a couple?"

hummed and creaked—and crawled back into position across the canal. The owner of the Volkswagen stopped him, stepping up to the narrow roadtrack with a smile. "Bonjour, Monsieur Kent. A glass of wine?"

"Thank you. Can I join you this evening? My wife and I are tired. It has been a big day."

"Come over when you please. I understand." The man bowed slightly. His name was Perrault, according to Buffer's introduction. The *I understand* was because Buffer had told them his "American cousin, Norman Kent" was with his bride. Nick could have given Buffer a different name, but if he needed to produce his passport and papers, that would lead to complications.

He went into the tent and gave Mata the flowers. She beamed. "They're beautiful. From the barge?"

"Yes. Prettiest little scow I've ever seen. But how in the world do they make a living?"

"Very . . . gently."

He thought that over as she filled a glass with water om a canvas bucket, put the flowers in it and arranged m as a centerpiece for the table. He watched her small k head bent over the cluster of color and shape, houghtfully moving a bud here, a leaf there, as if this moment in her life, concerned with bits of organic matter which would be dust in days, was all-important. As he had discovered in the Orient, this girl-of-two-worlds had unique depths. You could learn from her, if you had the time and the world would keep its hands off you.

She handed him his drink and they sat in canvas chairs with a view of the quiet stream and its tall flanking trees and the neat fields on the other side. Some of the oblongs were of different colors, probably flower fields, and they looked like a giant's patchwork quilt. They faced away from the other campers. Nick felt secluded, drowsy. It was very quiet except for an occasional car passing on the road or a murmur from another tent. He took a pull at his

glass. Mata said, "There was a bottle of soda water in the bucket Is your drink cool enough?"

"Delicious "

"Cigarette?"

"All right—thanks " He didn't care if he smoked or not—he was cutting down—but he enjoyed the way she lit one for him, carefully putting just the tip in her red lips, handing it to him carefully, as if to serve him was an honor. A man could get to like it. And make mistakes. Somehow he knew she wouldn't make a try for the brown bag's contents, but perhaps that was because they could be profitless disaster to anyone without strong connections. He felt distaste for his profession, in which you stayed alive by trusting no one.

She stood up and he watched her take off the wrap-type garment to reveal tailored shorts and a bra of the same gold-and-black fabric She hung the outer garment neatly on a hanger, one of a cluster hanging from the roof center-hook.

A woman to be proud of. A woman you could love? You could live out a pleasant life under such attention and affection. He had decided once, admitting that his small sampling was an unfair survey, that the most wildly passionate women in the world were the Scots and the most intelligently passionate the Japanese. He had told it to Bill Rohde one night in Washington over several drinks at the University Club, and the younger AXEman had considered the opinion carefully, then said, "The Scots have been going to Japan as sailors and merchants and so on for generations. First one of us gets there again, Nick, search for the right girl. Japanese-Scots Eurasian. May have to advertise."

Nick chuckled. Practical fellow, Rohde. It was only chance that he hadn't been sent to Amsterdam on the *Manson project* instead of Whitlock. Bill was handling the New York end and the Bard Galleries.

Mata leaned her small dark head on his shoulder. He placed an arm around her. "Are you hungry?" she asked.

"A little. We'll see what we can put together after awhile."

"There are beans and corned beef. Enough vegetables for a salad and oil and vinegar. Cookies and tea."

"Sounds great." Smart girl—she had the larder inventory in her head already.

"I hope they don't find us," she said softly. "The helicopters and that small plane bother me."

"I know. But if they've put up roadblocks they should grow tired after twelve hours and think we've slipped through. We'll leave early in the morning. Before it's light. But you're thinking clearly, Mata, as usual."

"Van Rijn is a shrewd and persistent man, I think."

"I agree. Yet he seems to have more real character than Laansma. If either one has principles, it's Van Rijn. By the way, Mata—did you ever date Herbert Whitlock?"

"Of course. He took me to dinner once."

Nick kept his arm still with an effort, it almost tensed flexively. "Where did you first meet him?"

"He bumped into me at Kaufman's. The photographer's place. That is he pretended to bump into me, but somehow he had planned it. He was looking for me. He wanted something."

"What?"

"I don't know. It was about two months ago. We dined at De Boerderij and went to the Blue Note on Korte Leidsedwarsstraat. The acts were wonderful. Herb was a good dancer."

"Go to bed with him?"

"No. Just some warm kisses at good night. I guess we would have the next time. But he went out once or twice with a friend of mine, Paula. And then he had the accident. I was sorry. I liked him. I'm sure he would have called me again."

"Did he ask questions? Have you any idea—what he was trying to do—or find out?"

"I thought he was like you. American agent probably. We talked mostly about photography and the modeling business."

"And business? Advertising?"

"Yes. The commercial side of photography. I planned the next time to ask him frankly if I could help him."

Nick shook his head thoughtfully. Poor Herb Steady and methodical. He lined up Mata and was pumping Paula, plodding along the trail. If he had been more frank with Mata, he might be alive now. Herb had never been a hunch jumper, he went by the numbers. "Did he drink much?"

"Almost nothing. One of the things I liked about him."

"Do you think he was murdered?"

"I wondered about it. Perhaps Paula knows something. Shall I talk to her when we get back to Amsterdam?"

"Please. You're right about his connection. He was an American agent. I'd very much like to know if the death was really accidental. I mean—the Dutch police are efficient, but—"

Nordenboss about her. He sighed—for want of a word, for want of a note, for want of a nail—

Mata's kisses and caresses were guaranteed to take your mind off your troubles. He stretched and relaxed, holding her as close as the small aluminum arm of his chair would let him.

You got so much more with one of Mata's kisses, he thought lazily. She up-spiraled your temperature through all five senses. Her subtle perfume blended with the moist warm-woman aroma and your nostrils dilated automatically like those of a hungry man smelling a roast in the oven. The taste of her lips and tongue stirred you as if every drop of her saliva was part of a sixth peach brandy. In your ears her soft sighs and occasional hums of satisfaction strummed tingles from your spinal cord with a sooth-and-surprise brilliance, the way Richter stirs you with a Tchaikovsky concerto. Don't clamp your eyes tightly shut, the out-of-focus loveliness is dynamite in close-detail, all the colors are absolutely true because when you try to see clearly they change to what your dreams want. And to hand, to the touch!—he tilted her and massaged her small rump thoroughly with the slow tenderness you use on the head of a beloved child after it has received a bump. It was enervating, yet no more so than the stroke of her agile fingers on his chest where she had teased them past his jacket and through his shirt, raising his T-shirt, yet not seeming to touch Wilhelmina.

Her hand danced down, solved the buckle of his belt in an instant. The belt, he thought grimly, with its flexible blade-and-file encased at the back, money folded long-way around one side, on the other flat waterproof packets of instant death or suicide powders, improved chloral hydrate and an acid dust of a dozen dangerous uses. Even as she exposed him, distended and stiffly vibrant, and her head made tiny bumping march-steps down his chest he felt like an alien in paradise. The guest with the dagger.

He stirred, "Darling, let me get some of this cloth and gear off."

She got up lazily, smiling in understanding, and held out her hand for his jacket. She hung it carefully on a hanger, added his tie and shirt, watched quietly as he tucked Hugo out of sight in his open case on the sleeping bags. "A swim would be nice," she said.

He promptly took off his pants "Still Javanese, eh? Want to get into the water five times a day?"

"Yes. Water is good. Gentle and it cleans—"

He glanced out Dusk was falling, no one was in sight from this angle. "I can wear my shorts." Shorts, he thought, even they betray me in the garden, with deadly Pierre sleeping in the secret pocket.

"This cloth isn't bothered by water," she said. "Anyway, if we go along the stream a little way perhaps we can swim nude. I like to be cleansed all over"

He found two towels, wrapped the brown bag and Wilhelmina and his wallet in one and said, "Let's get wet."

A straight, neat path followed the side of the stream. Just before they lost sight of the campsite Nick looked back around a thick tree trunk. No one appeared to watch them. The Rover people were cooking supper on a grill. He understood why the campsite was so small. As soon as they left the grove the trees were set back from the bank and evenly spaced, and cultivated fields came down almost to the water's edge. The path seemed almost like a towpath, as if in generations past ponies or mastiffs had hauled small barges or scows along the edges of the field, delivering manure, taking in harvests. Perhaps they had. They walked for a long time and still the fields went on and on. It surprised you in a country you thought of as small and densely covered by man. Man. He hefted Wilhelmina. The cancer of the planet. The farm machines and workers were gone from the fields.

Under one of the big trees he found the p[illegible] se-

cluded bower in the gloom, a shallow gully filled with dry leaves, like a nest. Mata studied it so long he looked at her. She was smiling. He asked, "You're enjoying something?"

"This place. You've noticed how neat the sides of the stream are—no litter or branches or leaves. Yet here are leaves, all dry and fluffy. I think lovers come here. Perhaps they have for many years."

He put the towels down at the base of the tree. "You're probably right. Or perhaps some farm lad just keeps the leaves forked over for a comfortable place for his lunch nap."

Mata was stripping off her bra and shorts. "That too—but this place has known lots of love. In a way—it's sacred. It has its own resident spirit. People sense it. Nobody carves the trees or leaves trash. Isn't that proof?"

"I guess so," he said thoughtfully as he shed his shorts. Go ahead, Carter, prove she's wrong!

Mata turned and walked into the stream. It shelved off sharply and she ducked under and came up a few yards upstream. "It is lovely. Warm. Come—"

It wasn't the sort of setting you disturbed with a dive, even if you were foolish enough to disregard unknown rocks. Nick Carter, who had on occasion dove a hundred feet and more, entered the water as softly as a twig falling and swam to the girl with noiseless strokes. He felt that this setting deserved quiet, respect for all those who had known and shared love in it. Or—he stood up beside Mata—is that spirit caretaker working on me!

"Don't you feel—good?" she whispered.

"Yes." The water was relaxing, the night air warm on his skin. Even breathing it, close to the calm surface, seemed to fill your lungs with something new, fresh, invigorating.

Mata draped herself against his side, partly floating, her head on a level with his. Her hair was quite long, and its damp coils draped against his neck with a tender softness

that was deliciously tantalizing. Another Mata plus, as he recalled, no hairdresser visits. A few moments with a towel and comb and brush and a bottle of the aromatic oil she used, and she could have it perfectly arranged again in any of a dozen pretty ways.

She faced him and put her arms straight along each side of his head and they kissed lightly, their bodies rubbing together with the rhythmless harmony of two boats moored side by side and rocked in a swell. He raised her slowly and kissed each of her breasts, an action expressing as much homage as passion, and when he lowered her she was supported partly on his distended tumescence. It was a position so emotionally satisfying you wanted to hold it forever yet perturbing because you were impelled to seek more. She sighed and her strong, small arms closed on his back. He could feel the palms open and close, the unthinking loving grip of a healthy baby kneading its mother's breast as it suckles.

They kissed exploratively for a long, enlivening time. A quiet aquasport of captivating sweetness, mixing greedy draughts with the daintiest *bonne bouche*. Neither moved quickly or with strength, this was a duet of skill and intuition. When at last he lowered a hand she captured it, whispering, "No. No hands. All the way Javanese, remember?"

He remembered, with a blend of anticipation and awe at the stimulation of the recollection. It took a little longer, and that perhaps was part of the delight. "Yes," he murmured as she floated higher and lowered herself on him. "Yes—I remember—"

The pleasure was worth the patience. A hundred times over, he reminded himself, as he felt the cloying warmth of her so excitingly accented and marked by the division of cool water. He thought, oddly, how simple and peaceful and rewarding life seemed at this moment, and he felt pity for those who said they couldn't enjoy making love in water. Shackled, they were. Bound in their inhibitions and

superstitions. Poor devils. They couldn't unwind and go back-back-back, forgetting-forgetting. Back to a warm sun on a pool and odd creatures trying to beach themselves to move from the sheltering liquid and build their own towering, racing, explosive hell. He imagined some of the creatures coupled in the water, like this, watching the climbers at the shore. Come back, they felt-thought-projected. It's much better like this. Up there you'll separate. There's no connecting fluid. Mata closed her legs effortlessly, like an old-fashioned swimmer, and her buoyancy carried her up and then she pressed herself down. He met her presence with a surge of need. His loins glowed with a new warmth, his spine tingled as if to the prickle of alternating current, his toes curled to grip the gravel bunching wetly under his insteps. Down here! In here, you fools! Forget— He made a small, involuntary growling sigh of satisfaction and Mata settled herself to him like a hungry puppy. She said, "I know—I know," as she fastened her lips to his.

They walked back to the campsite in the water, shielded by the darkness. Under the friendly hiss of a gas lamp Mata prepared a meal. She found curry and added a touch to the beef, a dust of chili for the beans, thyme and a sliver of garlic crushed between two spoons for the oil in the salad. Nick ate every scrap and felt ashamed for consuming at least a dozen cookies with his tea. Well—Buffer Whicker could buy a lot more now.

He helped her clean the dishes and pans and tidy the camp, trying to leave it as shipshape as they found it. Then, when they got into the sleeping bags, unzippered and spread open doubled, they began teasing each other. Instead of going to sleep they made love again. Fun sex, varied sex, wild sex, delightful sex, blending animal urges and healthy physical needs and affection and technique and experience. They then decided to take another dip and of course they must visit their special dell again. The

resident spirit ensnared them onto the leafy couch to try the brand new Swedish innovation. It was after one in the morning when they again cuddled sleepily in the soft downy nest Mata whispered, "Thank you, darling. We still make each other happy."

"Outstanding—and it's wild"

"Wild? Nice. Lovey love. Not everyone enjoys life this much."

"People like us develop a knack We've had the knocks to show us we're just passing by this way A visit not long remembered. Soon we will be dead and forget everything and soon everyone will have forgotten us We're free of phony guilt. We know it doesn't matter. So enjoy."

"Yes." Sleepily. "Only love and kindness are real, one guru told me. Some people can't help it. They're frozen young. Wrong treatment."

He kissed her lazily "Good night Miss Zen Freud. I guess you're right. I'm just too wonderfully tired—" His last comment was a long satisfied sigh.

Ordinarily Nick slept like a cat He could awaken himself within a minute of a mentally pre-set time. This night—excusably—he slept so deeply he was taken by surprise. Before he fell asleep he told his mind to awaken him if any passing car slowed or stopped A few went by, none stopped within hearing

The two big Mercedes stopped a half-mile from the bridge. Five men walked softly along the road and crossed the bridge to the camp with light cat-steps. Their leader eliminated the Rover and the Volkswagen with a peep of his light. The rest was easy. He merely glanced at the Volvo.

Nick's first knowledge of them came with a [illegible] glow that battered at his eyelids, a golden [illegible] his eyes as he snapped awake and sat up [illegible] eyes quickly but fiery pinwheels sparkled [illegible] expanding and contracti[illegible] would be [illegible]

moments. He put his head in his hands—caught cold turkey! Wilhelmina was under his sweater beside his case. He might reach it with a lunge. He forced himself to sit still. Patience and shuffle the cards. Mata was playing it smart. She lay very still. She would be awake now, watchful, awaiting developments.

The light was turned away from him and directed at the floor. He knew because the glow on his lids eased. "Thanks," he said. "Please don't shine that damn thing in my face again."

"Sorry." It was the voice of Jan de Troija. "There are several of us here, Mr. Kent. Please be cooperative. We want the Cullinans."

"All right. I have them hidden." Nick got up, keeping his eyes closed. "You blinded me with that light." He groped his way outside, pretending more helplessness than he felt. In the darkness he opened his eyes. The pinwheels still blurred his vision.

"Where are they, Mr. Kent?"

"I've got 'em hidden away I told you."

"Of course. But I'm not going to let you look for them. In the tent or the car or out in the fields. We can overpower you if we must. Make your choice quickly."

Some choice. He felt other men in the blackness. De Troija had plenty of backing. It was time to play a hunch.

He could imagine that once handsome, now immobile face watching him carefully. De Troija was a strong man, less to be feared than a weak man like Laansma. It's the scared man who kills you and then wishes he hadn't.

"How did you find us?"

"Helicopter. Mr. Van Rijn radioed. Very simple. The diamonds please."

"You're working with Van Rijn?"

"Not exactly. Now Mr. Kent—no more talk—"

It wasn't a bluff. "You'll find them in my case beside the sleeping bags. Left side. Under the shirt."

"Thank you."

One of the men went into the tent, came out and the bag rustled as he handed it to de Troija. Nick opened his eyes a slit. He could see—perhaps sixty per cent vision. Give himself another minute. He could knock the light out, but probably some of the others had them. If shooting started, Mata was right in the line of fire—

De Troija gave a disgusted snort. "You may have these for souvenirs, Mr. Kent. They are fakes."

Nick was glad of the darkness. He knew he flushed. Fooled like a schoolboy. "A switch. Groot—"

"Of course. He had a dummy package A sensible thing to do when you're handling items like the Cullinans."

"Did he get away?"

"Yes. He and Hasbrouck made the gateman open up again while Van Rijn and I were briefing the police helicopter to watch you."

"Then you're a Dutch agent. Who was the—"

"I didn't say that. How did you contact Groot?"

"I didn't. Van Rijn arranged the meeting. He was going to be the middleman. So where do you fit?"

"Can you contact Groot?"

"I don't even know where he lives. But he had heard about me—the diamond buyer. He'll find me if he wants me again."

"Had you known him in the past?"

"No. I bumped into him in Van Rijn's backwoods by chance. I asked him if he was the man selling the Cullinans and he saw a chance to cut out a middleman, I suppose. He showed them to me. I think they looked a little different from these dummies. Must have been the originals, since he thought I might be a diamond man."

"Why did you depart so swiftly?"

"When you were announced I thought it might be hijack. I passed Groot so I took the merchandise along. Told him to contact me, the deal was still on. I figured a younger man with a faster car should carry them."

Chapter 8

"Stole what? A package of junk from a big-time jewel thief?"

"Ah—then you knew the Cullinans were stolen goods when you offered to buy them." He sounded like a policeman. Affirm your guilt.

"As far as I know they don't belong to anybody, or to whomever has them. They came out of a Soviet mine and they were grabbed."

"Oh? It's not stealing if the victim is a Communist?"

"You tell me. Your woman in the black veil said they're hers."

Nick could see perfectly again. This de Troija was a master of feint and parry, but where did it lead and why? The other man handed him a card. "If Groot contacts you, please call me."

"Are you still working for Madam J?"

De Troija paused. Nick sensed that he was going to reveal something, then decided against it. "Yes," the man said. "I hope you call."

"From what I heard last time," Nick said, "she may get the Cullinans first."

"Perhaps. But as you can see, things are more complicated now." He went away into the blackness, flashing his light intermittently to find his footing. Men fell in behind him from the sides of the tent, another dark shape came

from beyond the Volvo, a fourth from down by the stream. Nick blew out a breath of relief. And how many more did he have? Thank his lucky star for a good guess—you couldn't call it judgment—not to reach for Wilhelmina when the light hit him.

He went back to the sleeping bag, tossed the dummy diamonds into his case, confirmed the position of Wilhelmina and that the magazine hadn't been slipped from the butt, and lay down touching Mata. She put her arm around him, saying nothing.

He stroked her smooth back. "You heard it all?"

"Yes."

"Van Rijn and de Troija are now cooperating. Yet they each offered to sell me the Cullinans. What are they—the Dutch Mafia?"

"No," she replied thoughtfully in the darkness, her breath sweet against his chin. "They are both respectable."

After a pause they both laughed. Nick said, "Respectable businessmen. Or Van Rijn is, anyway. De Troija is an agent for the world's leading business woman. They only take respectable profits, as big as they can get away with and if there's a reasonable chance they won't get caught." He recalled Hawk's maxim—*who gains*?

He let his photographic memory search back among the recent confidential IPR memos he had studied at AXE HQ—International Position Reports. The Soviet Union and the Netherlands were on good terms, with some coolness because the canny Dutch were cooperating with the mainland Chinese in certain nuclear research in which the Chinese were making startling progress. The Cullinans didn't fit into this pattern easily, and yet . . .

He thought and dozed until his watch read 6:15 A.M. He came fully awake and thought about Groot and Hasbrouck. Men who liked established plans. What would they do now? They wanted cash for the Cullinans and

they still had a contact in Laansma. Their move was forced—*Zugswang*.

He kissed Mata awake. "Time to roll."

They drove east into the arriving dawn. The cloud cover was thick, almost moist, but the temperature was moderate and pleasant. They turned northeast and Nick exclaimed as they skirted a neat town and crossed railway tracks, "That town. It's called America."

"You'll see a lot of American influence soon. Motels. Supermarkets. It has changed the face of the country. Especially along the main roads and near the cities."

They ate breakfast at a motel coffee shop which would have fitted into Ohio. Studying the map, Nick found the main road north to Nijmegen and Arnhem. When they came out into the parking lot Nick checked the car swiftly. He found it under the tailend, a narrow, three-inch plastic box with flexible wire clamps and a frequency changing button which he was careful not to touch. He showed it to Mata. "One of de Troija's boys was busy in the [illegible] we are."

[illegible] eanut. This one probably is cheaper or has a long battery life and a good range."

He turned south on the highway instead of north and drove for many miles until they reached a Shell station with a dozen cars waiting at the pumps. Nick pulled into the queue and said, "Take over. Keep her moving up toward the pumps."

He walked forward until he saw a car with Belgian tags. He stumbled and dropped his pen under the rear of it, went forward and said politely to the driver in French, "I dropped my pen under the rear wheels. Please don't move for a moment."

The plump man at the wheel smiled cheerfully and nodded. Nick retrieved his pen—and fastened the beeper

under the Belgian car. He held up the pen and thanked the man and they exchanged pleasant nods. They topped off the Volvo's gas tank and turned north.

"You put it under another car?" Mata asked.

"Yes. If you throw it away they know at once it's stopped. But maybe they'll trail that car for awhile. But it's a gamble. They may have a visual contact on us right now. It could be any of the cars on the road."

He kept watch for a car that stayed with them too long, made a U-turn at Zutphen, took a country road back and forth near the Twente Kanaal and no car followed them. He shrugged. "We seem to have lost them but it probably won't make much difference. Van Rijn knows I'm doing business with Laansma. But we may have confused them some."

They enjoyed an excellent lunch at Henglo and reached Geesteren just after two. They found the road to Laansma's country home. It was on a wooded plain which could not be far from the German border, with about 500 yards frontage on the rural lane lined with well-trimmed trees a sturdy two-rail fence.

t was a pale version of Van Rijn's opulent layout, the ference between a well-preserved, timeless plantation in Middleburg and a small country estate in Silver Springs assembled at bargain rates. The price would be relative—neither could belong to other than a moneyed man, but the comparison was clear. On one the trees were centuries old, the house gigantic, the water plentiful because that was what the old aristocracy looked for. The other—Laansma's—had a lot of land but none to spare, less stone work, and you couldn't stand almost anywhere and see a rook.

[illegible] the Volvo slowly up the curved drive, lot among t[illegible]y or so cars. He did big limou[illegible] vored by Van Rijn

drive leading to the rear marked Service. There could be cars hidden back there.

Beyond the parking area on a lower level there was a free-form swimming pool, two tennis courts, a shuffleboard court and three lanes that looked as if they were for bowls or bocci. Both tennis courts were in use, but only half-a-dozen people sat around the pool. The day was still cloudy.

Nick locked the Volvo. "Come on, Mata. Let's see what we can see before the party starts."

They walked purposefully along the terrace past the pool and sports area, circling the house. A gravel walk descended toward garages and stables and outbuildings. Nick led the way down it. In a field to the right of the barns two giant balloons swayed in the breeze, tended by a man who appeared to be valving something into one of them. Nick wondered if it was helium or hydrogen. His swift glances absorbed every detail. There were apartments or servant's quarters over the six-stall garage. Three small cars were parked neatly in front of it, and the service road continued on to disappear over a rise between cultivated fields into the forest beyond.

Nick was guiding Mata toward the garage when Laansma called from behind them. "Mr. Kent—hello—"

Nick turned and smiled and waved. "Hi."

Laansma trotted up, slightly breathless. He had been alerted in a hurry. He wore a knitted white sports shirt and brown slacks, in which he still looked like a businessman who was careful of his appearance. His shoes gleamed.

The news of Nick's arrival had clearly upset Laansma—he was struggling to conquer his surprise and command the situation. "Well—well! I wasn't—sure you'd be coming."

"Lovely place you have here." Nick introduced Mata. Laansma was effusive. "Why didn't you think I'd come?" Nick studied the balloons. One was covered with weird

designs, curves and shivers in fantastic colors, sexual symbols and flowing explosions.

"I—I heard some news."

"Groot get here?"

"Yes. I see we're going to be frank. It's an odd situation. You both were willing to leave me out, but you were driven back to me by events. Fate has willed it."

"Is Groot angry at me? I took his package."

The flicker of Laansma's eyes told Nick that Groot had told him he had fooled "Norman Kent"—and Groot *was* angry. Laansma spread his hands expansively and led them up the garden path. "Oh, not really. After all Groot is a businessman. He just wants his money safely and to be rid of the Cullinans. Shall we go see him?"

"All right. But I can't do business until tomorrow morning. That is—if he wants cash. I'm having a considerable amount sent out by messenger."

"Messenger?"

"A friend, of course."

Laansma was a study. He was looking at the holes in it. Where was the messenger when Kent was at Van Rijn's? And Norman Kent wasn't supposed to have friends in the Netherlands—at least not confidants who would carry large sums of money for him. "Couldn't you—call and have him come sooner?"

"Not the way it's set up. I'm mighty careful of you folks—"

"You ought to be careful of certain ones," Laansma observed primly. "I'm not flattered that you discussed the matter with Van Rijn first. And you see what happened. Because the Cullinans are allegedly stolen goods everyone grabs at them. And that de Troija! You know who he works for?"

"No. Just another Cullinan seller, I thought," Nick replied innocently.

Led by their host they reached a curve in the terrace rail overlooking the pool. Nick noted that Laansma turned

them away from the garage and outbuildings as quickly as he could. Laansma said, "I suppose we'll just have to wait. And Groot will have to stay. He won't leave without money."

"Do you blame him?"

"No."

Nick wished he knew what plans and projections were being evaluated in that too neatly groomed head. He felt that Laansma had swiftly considered and rejected the idea of getting rid of Groot and Hasbrouck the hard way. Small men with grand ambitions are dangerous, like babies who will clobber another for a toy until they are shown it is wrong. Some grew up never believing that greed was wrong, even senseless Laansma pressed a button under the railing A Javanese in a white jacket appeared. Their host said, "Let's get your things out of your car. Sim here will show you your rooms."

At the Volvo Nick said, "I have Groot's package. Shall I return it to him now?"

"Let's have a talk after dinner. Let it go until then."

Laansma left them at the foot of a big staircase in the front hall of the main house, urging them to enjoy swimming, tennis, riding—he sounded like the hustling proprietor of a small resort. Sim led them to two adjoining rooms. Nick whispered to Mata while Sim was stowing luggage in one of the rooms, "Ask him to bring back two whiskies and sodas."

When Sim had gone Nick joined Mata in her room, a chamber of modest size, like his own, connected with hers via the shared bath. "Mind sharing the bath with me, madam?"

She flowed into his arms. "I don't mind sharing anything with you."

"Sim is Indonesian, isn't he?"

"I'm sure of it. I wanted to talk to him—"

"Go ahead. I'll leave. Make a friend of him. Do you think you'll speak a common language?"

"He's Javanese. I can tell."

"Good. Take your time. Level with him about your recent arrival in the country and how hard it is to get along. Turn on the charm, you beautiful doll. No man can resist it. He's probably lonely. Since we're in separate rooms his dreams needn't be limited. Turn him on."

"All right, darling." She lifted her ear to be kissed.

Nick hummed a theme from *Finlandia* as he unpacked. He needed one little thread to start working on the knot and this might be it. The handiest, nicest, most serviceable lever in the world was sex, wonderful sex. He hung up his clothes, distributed his toilet articles, put his typewriter on a small table in front of the window. All this special equipment wasn't as much help as one lovely, clever woman. A knock sounded on his door. He opened it and admitted—Nicholaas G. Groot! The little man was erect and formal as ever, and unsmiling.

"Hello," Nick said heartily. "We made it. They couldn't hold us. Did you have trouble getting out that gate? I lost sliver of paint."

Groot's gaze was cold, calculating, cautious. "They ran to the house and Henry and I departed. The gateman needed only a little convincing to open up."

"We had some problems. Helicopters overhead and all that. I went way south and then east." Nick handed him the brown parcel. Groot looked into it briefly. "They're all right. I didn't even look at them. Haven't had time."

Groot was puzzled. "Yet—you came here."

"We were supposed to meet here, weren't we. Where else would I go?"

"I—I see—"

Nick chuckled understandingly. "You're wondering why I didn't beat it to Amsterdam and wait for your call? What do we need a middleman for? You don't—but I do. I may be doing business with Laansma a long time. I don't know this country. There's the problem of getting the diamonds across borders to where I want them. No—

I'm not a lone operator like you. I'm a businessman who cannot burn his bridges. So you'll just have to hold still for your side of the commission. Although I imagine you can make a better deal with Laansma now. He won't do much work for his money. You can hint that you can do business with me directly, but between us, I won't go that route. He said we'll talk business after dinner."

Groot was stalled on dead center, confused rather than convinced. "The money. Laansma says you have a courier. Did he go to Van Rijn's?"

"Of course not. We have a pattern. I stopped him. Early tomorrow morning I ring him and he comes in; or stays out, if we don't make a deal."

"I see." Groot quite evidently didn't, but he would wait with his eyes open. "There's one other thing—"

"Yes?"

"Your gun. I told Mr. Laansma of course what happened when we met. We—he thinks you should leave it with him until you leave. I know all about your American ways—nobody takes my gun and all that—but as a logical thing. As a gesture of good faith—"

Nick frowned. With Groot on a knife-edge he had to play it carefully. "I don't like to do that. Van Rijn and the others might find us here."

"Laansma has plenty of good men. They won't get in. He's putting a watch on the roads."

"I see." Nick shrugged and smiled and dug Wilhelmina out from where he had hidden her on a hanger under his jacket. He dropped down the magazine, levered the top action and popped the cartridge out of the chamber and caught it in the air. "I guess we can understand Laansma's point of view. Master in his own place. Here."

Groot departed with the weapon out of sight in his belt. Nick grimaced. They would search his luggage the first chance they had. Good luck. He removed the straps from Hugo's long case and the stiletto became an unusually fine letter opener in his writing case. He passed some time by

searching the room for a bug but found none, whic
meant nothing because when you own a place and ha
the time you can hide an excellent one in the walls.

Mata came through the connecting bathroom, smiling.
"We got along very well. He is terribly lonesome. He's
been with Laansma for three years and the pay is good
but—"

Nick put his finger to his lips, took her into the
bathroom and turned on the shower, speaking softly near
he water's splatter. "The rooms are perhaps bugged.
From now on—we'll do our important talking here."

She nodded. Nick went on, "He'll bump into you often,
you can bet on that, my beautiful one. When you have a
chance, tell him you're scared of Phil Laansma. And
especially of a big man who works for him who looks like
an ape with no neck. Ask Sim if this man would hurt a
girl. See what he says. And get his name if you can."

"All right, darling. Sounds easy."

"For you, my sweet, it will be." He turned off the wate
and they went into Mata's room and drank the highbal
nd listened to excellent jazz on the piped-in system. Ni
garded the unit thoughtfully. That would be an ide
ding place for a bug.

Although the clouds never entirely vanished they sw
in the pool, played a set of tennis which Nick let M
almost win, and had another guided tour of the es
under Laansma's polished direction. Groot never
peared again, but Amlie was at the pool in the late a
noon with a dozen other guests. All seemed to be fron
swinging existentialist set. Again, Nick thought, the d
ence between Laansma and Van Rijn. These were
always-ahustle generation ... Van Rijn would ente
the haves, the solid and watchful types.

The balloons were Laansma's pride, partly deflate
moored by heavy manila ropes. "These are new one
explained proudly. "We're just inspecting them for

They're okay. We'll make some trips in the morning. Want to try it, Mr. Kent? I mean, Norman—"

"I think so," Nick replied. "How about power lines?"

"Ah! You think ahead. And sensibly. They are one of our great dangers. Fortunately we only have one nearby, a few miles to the east. Of course there are a lot of small pole lines left, but you don't get low enough to hit them unless you're landing. We make short flights, then valve down and the truck picks you up."

Nick decided he'd rather fly in a soaring plane, but kept it to himself. Two big colored balls. An interesting status symbol? Or could they mean more? What would a psychiatrist say? They ambled back to the house. Laansma did not offer to show them the garage, although they took a brief look at the stable where three chestnut horses stood under shade trees in a paddock. More status symbols? Van Rijn rode ponies with abandon, Laansma preferred horses that looked as if they could handle themselves in an English hunt.

Dinner was dress—jackets and ties but not dinner jackets. Mata got the tip from Sim and they dressed accordingly. She said she was doing remarkably well with Sim, he was about ready for the questions.

Nick got Amlie aside over pre-dinner cocktails. Mata was the center of attention at the other end of the screened patio. "Are you having a good time, my outstanding blonde?"

"Yes." She didn't quite sound as if she were. She wore a keen, uneasy edge, much like Laansma's He decided her nerves were quivering again. Why? "I see you're enjoying yourself. She's charming"

"An old friend I bumped into."

"Not so old. And she certainly looks bumpable."

Nick followed her glance to Mata, where she smiled gaily amid a jovial group. She wore a cream-colored cocktail dress that clung hesitantly to one shoulder like a sari, one gold pin shaped like an oyster pretending to hold it

up. With her black hair and brown skin, the effect was stunning. Amlie, in tailored blue, was as chic as a model, yet— How did you measure real depth in women?

"It's sort of a business relationship," he said. "I'll tell you all about it later on. What room do you have?"

Amlie tilted her bright eyes quizzically at him, decided his grave, small smile was sincere and looked pleased. "North wing. Ten carpet in the hall. Second door on the right."

The rijsttafel dinner was magnificent, with twenty-eight guests seated at two tables. Groot and Hasbrouck exchanged brief formal greetings with Mata and Nick. The wines, beers and brandies flowed with the valves never off.

It was late when the boisterous group wound up either on the patio, dancing and snuggling or around a crap table in the library. "Le craps" was manned by a suave, husky man who might have been a pit boss in Reno. He was good. So good that Nick watched for forty minutes before he saw him switch the dice on an elated half-drunk youth who had bet a bundle and let it ride to more than 20,000 uilders. The lad was looking for a six point—he sevened his second roll. Nick shook his head. He would never nderstand men like Laansma.

He went and found Mata on an empty section of the veranda. A white jacket disappeared as he came up. Mata whispered, "That was Sim. We are now dear friends as well as compatriots. The big man is named Mike Myer. He is hiding in one of the apartments out in the back with two others Sim calls Beppo and Mack. They most certainly would hurt a girl and Sim has promised to protect me and get me away if I have to run. He is very nice, my dear. Don't hurt him. He has heard that Mike—or Oom as he is sometimes called—tried to harm Amlie."

Nick nodded thoughtfully. "Tried to kill her. I think Phil backtracked and they called it off. Maybe Mike went too far on his own. Anyway, he missed. And he tried to squeeze me but it didn't work."

"Something is going on. I've noticed Laansma in and out of his office several times. Groot and Hasbrouck have been in and out of the house. They're not acting like men relaxing for the evening."

"Thanks. Keep an eye open but don't let them notice you. Go to bed when you feel like it. Don't look for me."

Mata kissed him tenderly. "It better be business and not that blonde."

"Darling, the blonde is business You know you're the one I come home to. Even if it's a tent."

He cut in on Amlie who was dancing with a gray-haired man who looked as if he had had it. As they swayed in the corner farthest from the others he said, "It was Mike Oom Myer and Beppo and Mack who tried to shoot you. They're the ones who tried to pump me at my hotel. Probably because Laansma thought we were working together but later he changed his mind."

She stiffened in his arms like a plastic mannequin. "Oh!"

office a few minutes. I put the engravings back just like they were. But he gave me an awfully funny look when he came in and I was thinking all the way over on the plane—he knows—he doesn't—he knows—" Her eyes were wet.

"From what's happened, we can guess that he did know, or guess that you saw something. Tell me exactly what it was."

"There was an eight-by-ten blow-up on his drawing table. It had a complicated drawing and mathematical formulas and a lot of notes. All I remember are the words *U.S. Mark-Martin 108G. Hawkeye. Egglayer RE.*"

"You remember pretty well. And the blow-up was a portion of one of the proofs or separations you carried?"

"Yes. You can't make anything out of the dot patterns even if you know where to look. Unless you make a blow-up. I knew I was just a courier for some kind of spy game." He handed her his handkerchief and she wiped her eyes. "I thought maybe Phil didn't have anything to do with it."

"Now you know he does. Kelley must have telephoned him his suspicions as soon as you left."

"Norman Kent—who are you?"

"That doesn't matter, sweetie."

"What was that in the dot patterns?"

He chose his words carefully. "If you read all the space and missile technical magazines and every word in The New York *Times* you could put the puzzle together yourself."

"I don't. Who does?"

"I try to. Although I'm often weeks behind. Egglayer RE is our new multi-warhead satellite nicknamed Robot Eagle. I suspect that the information you brought over will tell Moscow or Peking or some other high-paying customer the telemetry details."

"How it's made?"

"Worse. How it is controlled and operated. The radio

frequencies which maneuver it and order it to release its cluster of nuclear devices. Bombs. That's especially nasty because you may find your own bombs raining down on you. Try and make an international complaint out of that."

She was crying again. "Oh, my God. I had no idea."

He put his arm around her. "We can guess more," he said, trying to be gentle yet anger her at the same time. There was a steel core in Amlie if he could reach it. "There has been an efficient information pipeline carrying data like this out of the U.S.A. for at least a couple of years. Military information, industrial secrets—once stolen they've turned up around the world as if they were airmailed. I think you stumbled onto the pipeline."

She used her handkerchief again. When she looked at him her chin was firm, her pretty features angry. "Damn them. I don't think you got all this out of The New York *Times*. Can I help?"

"Maybe. I think the best thing for you to do now is to go on exactly as you have. You've lived with the tension a few days so you've had practice. I'll find a way to get our suspicions to the U.S. authorities. They'll tell you to either stay on the job or get away from Manson's."

The bright blue eyes met his. He was proud to see how magnificently she had brought herself under control. "You're not telling me everything," she said. "But I think I understand. You'll tell me more when you can."

He kissed her—not a long embrace, but with warmth. You could count on an American girl in a squeeze. He murmured, "When you go to your room put a chair under the handle just in case. Get back to Amsterdam as soon as you can without stirring Phil up. I'll get in touch with you as soon as I can."

He left her on the patio, went up to his room and exchanged his white jacket for a dark coat. He took the platen out of his typewriter and assembled the action, creating the five-shot single-action revolver, bulky—but

reliable, accurate and throwing a powerful slug from its nine-inch barrel. He strapped on Hugo.

The next five hours were tiring but informative. He slipped out a side door and watched the party subside, speculating with private amusement as the upstairs lights went on—and off—in interesting combinations. The lad who had been playing a fine hot trumpet wandered out and fell in the pool, very drunk. His friends fished him out and carried him off.

Nick moved amid the lush landscaping like a dark wraith with patience. He circled the garage, stables and outbuildings. He followed two men to a guard post on the drive and the men they relieved back to a servants' cottage. He trailed another man back along the dirt road for at least a mile to where a country road came into the area, like a service entrance. The man used a small flashlight to find his post, a seat beside a tool shed. Philipine believed in night security.

When he returned to the buildings they seemed like a bright island under the floodlights and colored strings. He spotted Mike Myer, Beppo and three others playing cards in the garage office. Laansma visited them once, after midnight. At three A.M. a black Cadillac was driven from the garage down the back road and returned immediately. Nick heard the unintelligible squawk-chatter of a communications radio. When the Cadillac returned it stopped beside a large building and Nick saw three dark shapes shepherded inside. He lay prone in the shrubbery, partially blinded because the big car had stopped with its headlights pointed in his direction.

The car was put away and two men walked back down the service road. Nick prowled around the building, forced a door in the rear, then retreated and lay down again to see if he had triggered an alarm. The night was still again and he sensed as much as saw a dark shape moving along the building, exploring it as he had done but with more direction, as if he or she knew where to go. The dark

ance, the CD man. They all looked battered and sheepish. The CD man's eyes were red and swollen.

Nick said, "Sim, see if the handcuff keys are on that guy we tied up." He looked at the CD man. "How did they get you?"

"Gas in my face. I was blind and choked for ten minutes."

Sim returned. "No keys." He inspected the steel bar. "We'll need tools to get this off."

Nick said, "I think we'd better clarify our objectives. Mr. Van Rijn—do you still want to sell me the Cullinans?"

"I wish I'd never heard of them. But it wasn't all—for profit."

"Only incidentally, I suppose. You planned to get Groot?"

"I believe he killed my brother."

"I'm sorry." Nick looked at de Troija. "And Madam J? s she still interested in a deal?"

De Troija was the fastest to regain his composure. He ıooked deadly. "We want Groot. The diamonds go back to their owners."

"Ah! A diplomatic gambit." Nick sighed. "To ease the annoyance because the Chinese are helping you with the centrifugal problem."

"We need something. You have three defusion plants."

The CD man said, "You are well-informed for a diamond buyer. Mr. de Troija and I are working together now. Do you know the man with you?"

"Sim? Of course. He's from the opposition. Planted to watch Laansma's courier operation. If you want to make a friend you can let him take the Cullinans back." He handed the Beretta to de Troija, saying to the CD man, "Sorry—but I think he can use it better until your eyes improve. Sim—can you find tools?"

"Yes."

"Get them loose. Join me at Laansma's office. The

Cullinans and perhaps something I want are probably in his safe, so he and Groot won't be far away."

Nick went out the front door and across the grounds at a trot. As he bounded up the flagstones to the patio a man stood up in the darkness beyond the glow from the porch. "Stop—"

"It's Norman Kent," Nick answered.

Mike Myer walked out of the gloom, one hand behind his back. "It's an odd time to be out. Where have you been?"

"Why? You got something to hide?"

"I think we better see Mr. Laansma."

Myer brought his hand around from behind his back, an object in it. Nick barked, "Don't—"

The hand kept coming. Nick drew, fired and dove sideways in the fraction of a second made possible only by hours and years of practice. He rolled to his feet and ran several yards away, his eyes tightly closed.

After the blast of the gun a hissing sound persisted, softening Mike Myer's horrible groans. A mist rose and expanded like a white ghost—the gas that had gotten the CD man. Nick ran along the terrace and vaulted onto the patio beyond its reach.

Someone threw a main switch and the colored lights and floods flashed awake. Nick ran into the main hall and dove behind a couch as a gun crashed at the far door. He caught a glimpse of Beppo, suddenly awake and instinctively firing at this apparition popping out of the night with a gun.

Nick hugged the floor. Beppo called uncertainly, "Who *is* that? Come out."

Doors banged, people shouted, feet thundered on floors. The strong lights were behind Beppo, and Nick didn't want to make the house a shooting gallery. He took out a ballpoint pen with an unusually thick blue tube—fragmentation grenade. No—one of the guests might come in and get hit. He selected an orange one—blast and

smoke. He twisted the igniter and flipped it toward Beppo.

"Come out!" Beppo yelled. There was a scrambling noise. The orange tube clattered off the wall and landed past Nick. Damn those long fuses! Beppo had guts—he had tossed the hissing object back! *Barroom*!

Nick had barely time to open his mouth and equalize the pressure. Lucky he hadn't used fragmentation. He wiggled back and entered the thick gray smoke. He crossed the room and burst out of the artificial cloud with his gun leveled.

Beppo lay on the floor in a welter of crockery. Mata stood over him holding the base of an Oriental vase. Her lovely black eyes focused on Nick and glowed with relief.

"Ten-strike," Nick complimented. "Good thinking. Go warm up the Volvo and wait."

She trotted out. You could use a girl like Mata, but these lads played for keeps. The order was as much to get her safely away as to ready the car.

Nick burst into Laansma's office. Groot and his host were at the open safe, too distrustful of each other to tand a proper guard. Laansma was stuffing papers into a kingsize briefcase. Groot saw Nick first. One of his hands swung round and a little automatic spat a well-placed shot at where Nick had been in the doorway. Nick charged right across the corner of the room and into Laansma's private bathroom with the little gun snapping lead at hi backside all the way. A good thing Groot hadn't don more skeet or aerial shooting and learned instinctively t lead. Nick reversed his course and peeked around th door at knee level. *Splat*! Over his head. He ducked bac How many shots in that damn little gun? He had count six.

He whirled, grabbed a towel, bunched it and pushec around the corner of the door at head-level. *Splat*! T towel jerked. Groot wasn't so bad when he had a mom

smoke. He twisted the igniter and flipped it toward Beppo.

"Come out!" Beppo yelled. There was a scrambling noise. The orange tube clattered off the wall and landed past Nick. Damn those long fuses! Beppo had guts—he had tossed the hissing object back! *Barroom*!

Nick had barely time to open his mouth and equalize the pressure. Lucky he hadn't used fragmentation. He wiggled back and entered the thick gray smoke. He crossed the room and burst out of the artificial cloud with his gun leveled.

Beppo lay on the floor in a welter of crockery. Mata stood over him holding the base of an Oriental vase. Her lovely black eyes focused on Nick and glowed with relief.

"Ten-strike," Nick complimented. "Good thinking. Go warm up the Volvo and wait."

She trotted out. You could use a girl like Mata, but these lads played for keeps. The order was as much to get her safely away as to ready the car.

Nick burst into Laansma's office. Groot and his host [illegible] at the open safe, too distrustful of each other to [illegible]d a proper guard. Laansma was stuffing papers into a kingsize briefcase. Groot saw Nick first. One of his hands swung round and a little automatic spat a well-placed shot at where Nick had been in the doorway. Nick charged right across the corner of the room and into Laansma's private bathroom with the little gun snapping lead at his backside all the way. A good thing Groot hadn't done more skeet or aerial shooting and learned instinctively to lead. Nick reversed his course and peeked around the door at knee level. *Splat*! Over his head. He ducked back. How many shots in that damn little gun? He had counted six.

He whirled, grabbed a towel, bunched it and pushed it around the corner of the door at head-level. *Splat*! The towel jerked. Groot wasn't so bad when he had a moment

to aim. He pushed the towel decoy out again. Silence. Then stumbling sounds from the room.

A door slammed upstairs. Someone shouted. Feet pounded on halls. Now he could not hear Groot if he slipped out the magazine and snapped in a fresh one.

Nick sighed. Here's what I get paid for. He leaped out into the room, turned toward the desk and safe, the long odd platen-barrel gun in front of him. The casement window to the patio banged shut, vibrating its thick curtains.

Nick jumped on the window seat and hit the window with his shoulder, banging it open. In the thin gray light of dawn Groot was disappearing around the veranda toward the rear of the house. Nick raced after him and rounded the corner to watch a curious scene.

Laansma and Groot had separated, Laansma carrying the briefcase and running toward the right, Groot with a familiar little bundle in his hand racing for the garage. Out of the gymnasium, carrying the steel bar which still linked them together like slaves in an Arabian caravan came Van Rijn, de Troija and the CD man. Groot was twenty yards past them.

The CD man carried the Beretta Nick had given de Troija. He yelled after Groot, "Halt!" and fired almost before the echo died. Groot staggered, ran on.

De Troija had his hand on the CD man's arm. "Please —"

"Take it." He handed de Troija the weapon.

De Troija sighted quickly but carefully, triggered lightly. Groot collapsed at the corner of the garage. He was finished—you can tell when they collapse like laundry dumped out of a basket. The Daf whined out of the garage and fled down the back road. Henry Hasbrouck was at the wheel, bent low. De Troija sighted carefully, held the pose like a man in a duel, then lowered the gun. "We'll pick him up. There's enough killing."

Nick watched while pounding down the steps and turn-

ing right across the courtyard to follow Laansma. They hadn't seen him, and Laansma had run alongside the barn and out of sight just as de Troija lowered the pistol.

Where was Laansma headed? He had been going after a car but the men handcuffed to the pole blocked that route, as Groot unhappily discovered. Did he have another car hidden at the rear of the barn? Would he go through the woods? Nick debated as he ran, wondering if he should dig out a grenade. He held the revolver in his hand like a relay runner's baton, and he could do sprints in near-record time. He rounded the corner of the barn to see Laansma in one of the free-flight balloons, dumping ballast in a cascade as he gained altitude. The big pink ball was already sixty feet up. Nick paused, aimed, held his fire. Laansma's back was to him. Nick lowered the gun. He had killed, coldly—he had never slaughtered. A brisk breeze carried the balloon out of range. There was no sunlight yet—the balloon looked like a soiled, dull-pink pearl against the sky's gray.

Nick ran to the other brightly colored balloon. There were four tie-downs with trips with which he was not amiliar. He dove into the small plastic basket and slashed the mooring lines with a sweep of Hugo's razor-sharp edge. He floated slowly after Laansma's escape craft. Too slowly. What was wrong? Ballast!

Weights hung from the basket's rim, and neat bags of sand. Hugo snipped their ties. The balloon lurched, rose rapidly. In a few moments he was as high as Laansma, although a hundred yards from him. More ballast fell from Laansma's basket. Nick cut loose his last bags of sand.

It was suddenly very quiet and peaceful. Except for a gentle purr from the wind in the rigging, sounds were tiny squeaks from the grounds they were leaving. Nick held up an arm at Laansma and pointed at the ground with a sweeping motion, a clear signal—*land. Go down.*

Laansma answered by throwing overboard a briefcase—

empty, Nick was sure—and a number of other articles. The other balloon rose slowly above his own, yet Nick's craft was gaining on the other. Why? Nick decided that it was because his sphere seemed to be a few feet larger than the other, he had more surface for the wind to work on. Laansma had taken the newer balloon, but it was either smaller or not fully inflated.

Nick threw over his shoes, gun, his shirt, T-shirt. Laansma responded with a shower of clothing tossed into the winds. Nick floated almost in under the other balloon and they looked at each other as if to say, *"There's nothing more to drop—but me."*

"Go down," Nick called.

"Go to hell," Laansma yelled back.

Nick glared at him. What a standoff. I can stay with him, but it looks as if the wind will carry my balloon far beyond him. He can land and be lost by the time I land and get back to him. Or I can land now and try to follow him. He'll cross one river and I'm beaten.

Nick studied his basket. It was held by eight lines that ran aloft, joining a web of them where the balloon bellied outward. Nick cut the four lines that came to the centers of the basket's edges and square-knotted the opposing ropes. He hoped the test-strength of the lines had a generous safety factor—he was a heavy man. He clambered into the ropes he had tied, hanging like a spider in a very limited web, and slashed away the corner ropes. The basket spun away toward the earth. Nick decided not to look down again.

His balloon went up. There was a shout from above as he felt the mushy contact of his fabric ball against Laansma's, and then he was scraping up the side of the other balloon, passing Laansma so closely he could have reached him with a fishing pole.

Laansma looked at him with wide, horrified eyes. "Your basket!"

"Gone. It's more fun this way."

Nick rose out of sight as his balloon joggled the other and his opponent clutched the rim of his perch.

As he skidded along the side of the soft ball he plunged Hugo into the fabric and gutted it open like a fisherman sawing through a fat salmon's belly. The ripped craft seemed to belch and shudder, then went down swiftly. Nick found the gas valve not far above his head and used it cautiously. His balloon descended.

He saw that much of the fabric in the ripped bag, now far below, was compacting at the top of the rope web and acting as a parachute. He recalled reading that this was a common occurrence. It had saved the lives of hundreds of balloonists. He valved more gas from his own bag. As he tumbled to a stop in an open field Mata raced across a wagon track, the Volvo bumping wildly.

He waved and ran to the car. "Nice timing. Did you see where the other balloon hit?"

"Yes. Come on—"

As they bumped down a lane she said, "You sure scare a girl. I couldn't see which balloon was dropping."

"Did you see the impact?"

"Almost. It was hard. Didn't you?"

"No. The trees hid him from me before he crashed."

Laansma lay in a junkpile of rope and fabric. Van Rijn, de Troija, Sim and the CD man untangled him somewhat, then desisted. The CD man said, "He's hurt. At least a broken leg. Wait for an ambulance and a plastic break-bag." He looked at Nick. "You play for keeps."

"I'm sorry," Nick answered honestly. "I did what I had to do. I could have shot him. Did you find the Cullinans on Groot?"

"Yes." He handed Nick a red cardboard file tied with cord that he had picked out of the debris of Laansma's balloon. "Is this what you're looking for?"

It held sheafs of engraving separations, photo prints, film packs. Nick studied the irregular dot patterns in one of the larger proofs. "These are what I want. It looks like

he kept copies of everything that traveled through his hands. Do you know what they are?"

"I believe so. We've been watching him for some months. He's been making deliveries to half-a-dozen expensive spies. We weren't sure just what or where he was getting it. Now—we know."

"Better late than never," Nick replied. "At least we can backtrack all these items. Change everything we have to. It's good to know *what* they know."

Sim joined them. Nick's expression became unreadable. Sim saw it and smiled. He hefted the small bag that held Groot's loot. "We each got what we wanted, eh?"

"If you're willing to look at it that way," Nick answered. "Maybe de Troija has ideas about your end—"

"No," de Troija said. "We believe in international cooperation where crimes are concerned." Nick wondered what Madam J would say to him.

Sim looked down sympathetically at the half-conscious Laansma. "He was so greedy. He should have kept a tighter rein on Groot."

Nick nodded. "Your pipeline is finished. Are there more diamonds where the Cullinans were found?"

"There'll be other pipelines. There always are. As for diamonds—I'm sorry. That's classified information."

Nick chuckled. You could admire alert opposition. "Not with microdots there won't. Stuff in those channels is going to be looked at a lot more closely."

Sim lowered his voice to a whisper. "There's one last item in there that wasn't delivered. I can authorize paying you a small fortune. It won't be missed."

"You mean the Mark-Martin 108G plans?"

"Yes."

"Sorry, Sim. I'm damned glad you didn't get them. Makes my work worthwhile—knowing I didn't gather up *all* ancient history."

Sim shrugged, grinned and they walked toward the cars together.

Nick put Amlie on the plane for New York the following Tuesday. The parting was warm with promises for the future. He returned to Mata's apartment for dinner thinking, Carter, you're a fickle man but friendly.

She had asked if he knew who the men were who had stopped them on the road that first evening after dinner. "Thieves," he assured her, thinking that Van Rijn would never again explore the action route. When you've got it made, sit tight and let compound interest take its course.

Mata's friend Paula was a cherubic minx with quick innocent laughter and let's go-go eyes. A cuddle-kitten so well-rounded she looked padded but wasn't. After three drinks they leveled with each other.

Paula said, "Yes, we all liked Herbie. He became one of the gang at The Red Rooster. You know—fun, talk, music, dance, love. He wasn't used to so much drink or the dream candy but he tried. He wanted to be one of us, I know. He was happy-blind when he said, 'I'm going over to cool off.' We never saw him again."

Nick frowned. "How do you *know* what happened?"

"It happened before," Paula said sadly, shaking her pretty head. "He got high—he jumped in. Only the other time there were six of us. We thought he had gone home this time, but he had gone into the canal."

"Maybe somebody pushed him."

"There was no one out there but him," Paula said. "After dinner let's go look. You'll see what I mean."

Nick nodded gravely, picked up the telephone. He said, "I want you to tell this to a friend of mine. It's—something we all must—consider. You can jump to conclusions too often. And I have an idea he'll enjoy meeting you, Paula, if he has time."

The bright eyes sparkled. "If he's like you, Norman, I'd like to meet *him*."

Nick grinned briefly—then placed his call to Hawk in London